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**THE
CONFESSIONS OF A PRIVATE**

THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRIVATE

BY

FRANK GRAY

LATE 8TH ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGIMENT
AND FOR SOME TIME OF THE OXFORD AND BUCKS LIGHT INFANTRY
AND WITH THE THIRD CORPS

OXFORD

B. H. BLACKWELL, BROAD STREET

1920

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DEDICATED
TO THE
MEMORY OF MY COMMANDING OFFICER,
THE LATE
COLONEL R. E. DEWING, D.S.O.,
WHO WAS A PART (OR THE VICTIM) OF A SYSTEM,
BUT WHO POSSESSED A FINE KNOWLEDGE OF
MEN, WAS HUMANE, KIND, AND COURAGEOUS, AND
SO REMAINED TO THE END

PREFACE

A PART of the following story appeared originally in diary form in the *Oxford Chronicle*.

In preparing my diary for publication in book form, I have corrected matter and impressions as later experiences necessitated, and I have added matter the publication of which previously would have been both impossible and wrong.

In making these additions I have, so far as possible, refrained from personal comment, contenting myself by stating and reporting indisputable facts and events, and then leaving them to the judgment of my readers.

Some accounts must, I fear, be in the nature of reflections upon the authorities that be, and indeed I found much left to be desired in the system of which I became part.

I venture to hope that if fault be established, the public will not accept, after victory attained by sacrifice, courage, and the resources of the country, rather than by the skill of the leaders, so-called remedies and improvements from within, as they did after the South African War, but will demand and insist that the favoured and very limited class responsible for the system may be, if not wholly removed, at least so leavened by the ability without that, lost as a recog-

nizable force, they will cease to be a danger to the State.

I have used every endeavour throughout to avoid anything which may seem to be an attack on any individual. I attack no individual, for those who did wrong were either themselves the victims of a system, or, at all events, were guilty of no greater crime than those who will escape punishment or exposure.

I am happy to record that at the hands of every officer I came personally in contact with I received justice, consideration, and kindness.

Without wishing to anticipate the findings of my readers, I desire to say that the impressions left upon my mind after my recorded experiences are as follows :

1. My Tommy pals were splendid and always splendid. They executed right orders with obedience, courage, and persistency. They executed wrong orders with equal obedience, courage, and persistency. More cannot be said.

2. With exceptions, the N.C.O.'s were indispensable alike to officers and men. Their only fault was that it was they who made a bad system possible. If I may differentiate between grades of N.C.O.'s, I unhesitatingly single out the junior N.C.O.'s or lance-corporals. In my experience they were frequently doing the work, and accepting the responsibilities, of senior rank, and all too frequently remained unpromoted because they were too valuable and useful in the work they were already doing.

3. Junior officers were in the main great. Many.

were young, original, and clever, and it was only partially that these qualities were stifled by system and so-called discipline bordering on servility. Captains frequently possessed rather the profitable qualities of their juniors than the hall-mark of the system of their time-serving superiors; and even Commanding Officers, in my time recruited from without more frequently than from within the system, were distinctly good.

Finally I come to the Higher and Superior Commands, almost exclusively selected from or hampered by the united aristocrats of an antique system. Well, I do not wish to speak ungenerously or intemperately, but my experiences taught me to believe that in fact we had no Leaders and no Generals.

Throughout I speak of rules and not exceptions.

Let me here record a debt of gratitude which I owe beyond the power to pay to N.C.O.'s and men who were my friends throughout, who made hardships endurable to me, and gave me the life I still retain.

Lastly, I thank Mr. Percy Linaker, the editor of the *Oxford Chronicle*, my first sponsor, and who has throughout placed at my disposal, to my advantage, his ability and experience.

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THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRIVATE

CHAPTER I

A MILITARY DEPÔT

ON the night of February 12, in the third year of the War, I wrote the following in my diary :

“ To-day ends, at all events for a time, twenty years, almost to the day, of strenuous and varied, sometimes exciting, civil life. No man of my age could accept this unmoved; older men, I always think, in great crises mercifully have their feelings blunted.

“ To-morrow I go as a conscript to the Army—that may be taken to be my position. I go, at all events, to-day anxious to do exactly as the lowest does. I believe I shall find this hard from two standpoints: first, I shall be faced with continual temptation to accept something better than others; secondly, my life has had few physical hardships to encounter. On the other hand, I have one great help of which I cannot be deprived, and which outweighs all my disadvantages. That is, that I am taking by deliberate choice the worst lot which is being forced upon others.

“ To-morrow and the future are complete blanks. I await them.”

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I look back now and reflect upon my earliest military days. How well I remember stepping out of my car at the recruiting office, and my man's last salute and "Good-luck, sir!" From that and all that it meant I passed to a number and to associate with those who had no influence to take them from the common lot of an infantry line regiment.

I became lost in a crowd, sometimes kindly treated and sometimes bullied. How well I remember the first night in barracks—the cold bare barrack-room with a fire at one end, the forms, the tables, the thirty-seven collapsible beds, the Army blankets. How well I remember, too, the jarring hilarity of some of the inmates, the silent sorrow of others, and late in the night the suppressed sob of a man in a bed neighbouring mine. There were men in the room who had been dragged from recently confined wives; others who had surrendered all that a life of labour and self-denial had given—not much, perhaps, weighed in the scale of social consideration, but their all. Later I have often had the opportunity of contrasting with the silent sorrow of such men the would-be, well-meant humour and irresponsible horse-play of a boy of eighteen, at a meal, or in a barrack square, striking like a dagger to the pride and personal sensitiveness of a responsible father of forty, of whom by the levelling methods of military service the boy became the equal.

During my first night in barracks I recorded a vow that never would I be a party, active or passive, to conscription, whatever the call and whatever the cause, and no matter who the ruler, Autocrat or King Demos,

by whom the edict was made. Subsequent experience has strengthened that determination, and I here record that never on this side of the grave will I have any part or lot in the delivery of lives to an incompetent military organization. Nor do I believe that if the military authorities placed their own house in order, any call could arise so overpowering and irresistible that I would deprive a single conscript of his right to life.

Before I continue my narrative I have some other things to say.

When I entered the Army I determined that I would take no advantage of any inequality of circumstances, and incidentally that I would live upon my pay of sixpence a day. But I could not control the attitude of others towards me, and I admit I received consideration that less fortunate men did not. Still, it is a matter of gratification to me that I did in fact live on my pay for six months in England and in France, with the single exception that when I was quartered at Portsmouth my wife, who came to stay at Southsea for a fortnight, suffering at the sight of my worn and haggard face, insisted that I should take an extra meal daily with her. And if a comparatively delicate man of thirty-seven felt the pangs of hunger, what did the farm labourer of eighteen feel?

A Secretary of State or his understudy will tell you in the House of Commons that a common soldier's rations consist of so much meat and so much bread per diem, and that there is nothing in the suggestion that while some are surfeited others are starved, because in

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fact all soldiers are treated alike. The Commons will accept that reply and through them the public. Little do the Commons and public know the price we have paid for that acceptance. I will give my own reply, which is very different from that of the Secretary of State—a reply based upon my personal experience.

1. At Portsmouth I was hungry.
2. At Fort Widley the food was better and I had too much.
3. I have seen the troops' rations stolen.
4. I have stolen the troops' rations.
5. I have been a party to the transfer of the troops' rations to English and French civilians.

In Rome I became a Roman.

You will be told that the troops were well supplied, but I will go further and tell you that, if the authorities disclose the food transported to France and available in France for the troops, and also disclose the number of men sent to France and the number of days served by them there, it will be found that to suggest that they could have consumed one-half of the quantity supplied offends against the elementary rules of nature. But at times I was hungry, and the occasions of which I speak had no connection with campaign difficulties, which later we were all prepared to accept in silence and cheerfulness. In my defence, I say I only stole when I was hungry, and when hunger arose through mismanagement. Necessity knows no laws, and incidentally it taught me to be a clever thief.

When I went to Cowley I was a soldier and an earnest man. I had given up much to go—I had

sacrificed comfort, luxury, and income, but unlike many of my pals I had not sacrificed my all. I could only justify my own conduct by my earnestness, but almost from the outset my faith was shaken. I found resources squandered—resources not only in material but in human life. I found incompetency rife; and above all, I found that many of my superiors were not in earnest. They were looking after themselves, many of them secure in “cushy” jobs. I soon began to feel I had been a fool to make sacrifices, a fool to be in earnest. Sometimes it seemed to me that only the fools were in earnest, but at Cowley I comforted myself with the thought that all would be well when I got to the real soldier’s life at Portsmouth; and at Portsmouth I thought of the reality and earnestness in France. At the base in France, filled, as it appeared to me, with people whose existence could only be justified by recruits wasting their time there, I fixed my hopes on the lines, and it was there that I finally learnt that I had better look after myself and be a little more cunning and a little less earnest. And when in this way I had “learnt the ropes,” I had a better time.

And now, after this necessary digression, to tell briefly of my daily experiences at Cowley.

My first day in the Army may be recorded as my idlest day for eighteen years.

I went to the recruiting office, 90, High Street, Oxford, at 9.30 a.m. I had to wait until after 11, and then, with other recruits, I was taken before the officer in charge; and next, under the care of a sergeant who

cycled behind us, we went by bus to the barracks at Cowley. From 11.30 to 1 o'clock we wasted our time in the gymnasium waiting for the completion of certain formalities. From 1 to 2 we went to dinner at the canteen. From 2 to 4 there was more waste of time and more formalities. There was a great and unwieldy crowd of recruits at this period at Cowley, two and a half years after the beginning of the war, for had not the often-repeated cry once more gone up—"More men!"

I went to my barrack-room, where I was told to make my bed. Having done it, I was discharged for the day, the remainder of which I spent in gossiping, meeting some very interesting fellows.

This is from my diary of the two following days:

"At 6.30 the bugle sounds. The corporal at once calls out, 'Get up, you lads, get up!' Then the sergeant rushes into the room shouting, 'Show a leg! Get out of it! Don't let me find any of you in bed when I return!' There is little dressing to be done, as for warmth I have slept in most of my clothes. I did not wash before breakfast as all the water was frozen. Parade at 7.15., then start drill; a two-mile march. A good breakfast at 8—cold meat, bacon, tea, and bread and butter; 8.55, parade; 10.55, parade to 12.55; dinner, 1 p.m.—boiled mutton, beans, and potatoes, plum-duff; 1.55, parade; 4 o'clock, duties done. I go out.

"The occupants of the barrack-room, of whom there

are thirty-seven, though twenty-eight is the normal number, fall under three heads—recruits waiting to be clothed and sent to training centres; men (I am one) approved for a unit, waiting to be sent to their unit; and men returned from their units who have fallen by wounds or illness from fighting categories to the C₃ or B₃. They are to be used as substitutes to get A men out of civil occupations. The last class may be sub-divided—(a) fighting men who have returned wounded, and (b) the regular “old soldier,” who in every barracks is to be found much in evidence, and is generally doing (or escaping) fatigue duty, a man who cannot be found work as a substitute and equally fails to be placed in military life.”

On Sunday we were called half an hour later than on week-days, and had nothing to do until breakfast. After that there was another idle interval until 11, when we assembled for church parade, and, headed by the band (composed chiefly of boys, but a good one), we marched to the gymnasium for service.

I had expected to leave Cowley at the end of a week, but some confusion prevailed owing to the arrival of a large number of recruits, and the clothing running short. There was an ever-growing crowd at the barracks. Most of the recruits came from Birmingham or London. They were clothed and then drafted out (in a few cases) to units and to training centres. Nobody who saw these arrivals and departures could be under any misapprehension about there “being a war on,” or could fail to feel the extent of the patriotic

sacrifice which the individual had to make. The barracks seemed to be the pulse of the nation's griefs, and that pulse was beating at every other barracks in the land. I felt that these recruits were so many human documents, and that many books might be written on their history and their sorrows. These days and nights are impressed on my memory so firmly that no lapse of time will ever erase them.

Another aspect of Cowley which struck me at the time, and which lingers obstinately in my memory, was its extraordinary unreadiness. Here, in the third year of the war, recruits were pouring in—not unexpected arrivals, but invited guests, so to speak; and at Cowley, where the notices inviting them emanated, the time of their arrival was known fourteen days beforehand. Nevertheless, on and after their arrival there were men without clothing, and clothing without men; meals without men, and men without meals. A large part of my early days at the barracks was taken up with a sorting scheme, which consisted of calling all names out and grouping those who answered upon different sections of the barrack square. Sometimes the call was for men who had knives and forks as opposed to those who had not; and then the main group so created fell into confusion when it was attempted to form second main groups of those who had boots and those who had not—for it did not follow that men who were without boots were necessarily without knives. And then before the sorting was complete our identity was lost by a rush to a meal, followed by a fresh sorting which only served the

actual purpose of making us more skilful in a sorting on the morrow.

One day, after leaving one of these sorting parades, I came upon an officer and an N.C.O. standing near my barrack-room. I overheard their conversation, and they were congratulating each other on the fact that there was no greater confusion. I was afterwards to learn that these congratulations were not unmeet if a military standard of management was to be taken as the basis of comparison. Indeed, on that basis Cowley had every reason to be proud. But if one took ordinary commercial standards of management as one's basis, then "horrible" is the only word that describes the situation at Cowley. Confusion was increased (I give this only by way of example) by men being sent away as suitable and medically fit for the R.F.A. dépôt, and being returned two days later as unsuitable and medically unfit; but, thank goodness! additional confusion was avoided by immediately decreeing that these men were medically fit for the more arduous military service of infantry men. I verily believe that some of my more thoughtful companions at Cowley, taking advantage of the crush, returned to their homes to await what they conceived to be a more propitious time for being "called up."

One day soon I had to undergo a medical examination—of my experience of these examinations I will speak later—and I knew that meant I was to leave on the following day.

In the morning we left Cowley for Cambridge Barracks, Portsmouth. There were only two to go,

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but we were nevertheless placed in charge of an N.C.O. for the journey. My only complaint is that the N.C.O. proved rather difficult to look after, but the circumstance would be unworthy of comment except as a common example of the unnecessary use of men and unnecessary expense, and more, still, of the system of relieving privates of all responsibility and need of thought for themselves. Probably, if the point were put to the military authorities they would explain that all recruits at all times were put in charge of N.C.O.'s. In my experience throughout they failed to recognize that the method of the past in dealing with crowds of recruits of one age and substantially one temperament was not necessarily the best method of dealing with one or two men of experience and age double that of the average recruit of peace-time. In other words, the military authorities learn nothing and forget nothing.

CHAPTER II

IN BARRACKS FOR TRAINING

ON my arrival at Cambridge Barracks, Portsmouth, I interviewed the sergeant-major, gave certain particulars, and was then shown my barrack-room. Its arrangements were simplicity itself. There were no bedsteads, but just three boards and a straw mattress for each man.

One of my first duties on the morrow was to be medically inspected. I had previously attended two medical inspections at Cowley, about which I am not entitled to make any complaint. The present examination was before a civilian doctor. He did in fact examine me, and looking at my hands he asked: "What were you in civil life, and who passed you as an A man?" I replied: "It was and is my wish." "Any way," continued the doctor, "I have only power to pass you as an A man, which you can be if you like."

I *attended* many medical examinations after this, but I was never again actually examined in the Army. I found, however, that the approved method among the doctors was to pass a man on the understanding that if too high a grade was in the first place determined, it was sure to be corrected at a later examination; while those who conducted the later examinations went on the supposition that the first

grading was correct. A boy of nineteen who was examined next to me had an operation wound in his stomach, ten inches long, and the operation had been performed only ten weeks before. He also was passed A, and was trained as an A man. The poor little chap could not walk any distance, but he always did his best.

Whatever my physical condition may have been, I was robust and fit compared with many of my pals. I will refer to four of the most startling cases of unfitness that came under my observation. They by no means exhaust the list of medical-freak soldiers whom I have known, but they are typical examples.

There was Quarterman, by calling a shepherd, about thirty-eight years of age, and a very decent fellow. He had been passed as an A man fit for training for the lines. But, as a matter of fact, he could not walk. To the great amusement of recruits and the public, when his platoon marched past or doubled, he scrambled over the ground in an ungainly manner, anything between eight and thirty yards behind the rest. After eleven weeks of this pitiable performance, which must have inflicted upon him great physical and moral suffering, the authorities came to the conclusion, obvious to everybody else from the first, that as a matter of fact he could not march. And so he became a plate-cleaner. I do not know what the belatedness of the discovery cost the country.

A boy in my platoon, whose name I have forgotten, was in sober truth an idiot. He was knock-kneed and, I believe, deformed. Nevertheless, one of the tasks

which he was called upon to perform weekly was to march from Cambridge Barracks to a drill-hall at Portsmouth, a distance of three-quarters of a mile, with his rifle sloped upon his shoulder and his bayonet fixed. A condition precedent was that he should not march on the outside of a column, lest the public should laugh. He could only keep his rifle on his shoulder by the use of two hands, and those immediately behind him had to hold the bayonet, partly to assist him in carrying it and partly to protect their own lives. He disappeared after a time.

The third example was a boy named Heath. We called him "corporal" because we thought he looked like a miniature Napoleon. He was deformed, I believe, in both legs and back. He never complained, and only once did I hear him sob as he gamely struggled on under his pack in France. He did not fall out then, but when an officer urged him up into his place in the ranks, the men growled to such purpose that the officer said: "All right. He shall be looked after if he cannot go on." But "Corporal" Heath did go on.

After five months in France, his company officer, on the eve of going into action, told him that he was not fit to be an infantry soldier, and would be transferred to a labour battalion, and so could please himself whether he went into the lines when we were to make an advance. "I should like to go with my pals," was Heath's reply. His unfitness for the service for which he was passed was discovered eight months too late. Again, how much did the delay cost the country and

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him? That Heath left the battalion when he did was, I believe, due to a man who had protected and helped him in France, a man who gambled and drank, and would have been called a blackguard in civil life, but who had a soul after all.

The work and routine at Portsmouth were shortly as follows: Réveillé, 6 a.m.; parade, 6.30 to 7.30; breakfast, 8; parade, 8.45 to 10.45; parade, 11 to 12.30; dinner, 1; parade (except Saturday), 2 to 4.30.

The nature of the parades varied as the training progressed, but they included squad drill, musketry, physical exercises, arms drill, and lectures.

These are extracts from my diary, which relate my impressions jotted down day by day:

“We are a decidedly mixed company in my barrack-room. I will give the list of occupations so far as I know it at present—a zinc worker, a cowman, a shepherd, two clerks, a leather-cutter, a shell-turner, a butcher’s labourer, a lumberman from Canada, and a gardener.”

* * * *

“I met to-day a man who until recently was ostler at an Oxfordshire country inn. It is with difficulty that he can be restrained from calling me ‘sir.’ . . . One of my mates always takes his meals on the floor, and he seldom uses knife or fork. When he has finished the floor always reminds me of a mat after an overfed terrier has been having a meal there. But he is a thoroughly good fellow, and if he sees that there is not much meat on my plate he always comes along with

•

his plate, saying, 'Ere mate, take a bit o' mine.' And always also he brings me his bowl of tea and asks whether I would like to finish it. Sometimes I am very glad to do so."

* * * * *

"Training has become a serious business, and now the test comes. At 7 o'clock we parade under a drill sergeant, and do squad drill till 8. This includes 'marking time' for five minutes on end. It seems an easy proposition, but if anybody tries to do it, lifting each foot six inches 140 times a minute, he will find it less simple than he thought."

* * * * *

"With another fellow I am orderly of the room for the day. That means that we are responsible for its cleanliness. In addition we have to clean up the plates and basins after breakfast, dinner, and tea—no light task with practically cold water. Further, we have to bring the food from the cookhouse, and we are liable to be called out to do any special job. To-night, for instance, the demand was made upon us to peel the swedes for to-morrow's dinner. It makes the day pretty full."

* * * * *

"We are rudely awakened from our slumbers at 4 a.m., and learn that a hospital ship has been torpedoed in the Channel. We are told to give up our so-called beds at once, take a rug, and get where we can. I go to a distant part of the barracks, and in a room there curl up in my rug on the floor. But at 4.30

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we are told to stand by and help. At five the wounded begin to arrive in scores of motors; at 6.30 a train is ready, and it is decided to send them on to their hospitals of detention. They are forthwith put back in the ambulances. We return to our rooms at 7 and put straight. We understand that the wounded have all been saved, but they bear the marks of the horror and suffering to which they have been barbarously subjected."

* * * *

"The two great events of the day have been (1) a lecture on the means of resisting gas attacks, given by a sergeant; and (2) the serving of pudding-crust with beefsteak for dinner. We have supper on two nights a week only—Wednesday (soup) and Thursday (cocoa). I understand the explanation to be that the men are paid on Friday (pay of sixpence a day), and it is supposed that up to Tuesday they will be able to buy supper for themselves. But usually the money does not last beyond Saturday."

* * * *

"Eight of our squadron were sent to the orderly-room for various offences. Five were cautioned, two were sentenced to two days' "C.B.," and three to three days' "C.B." ("C.B." means confinement to barracks.) In addition, after parade at 4.30 you have to report at the orderly-room every two hours. Furthermore, at each report the victim is liable to be given some hard work to do.

"It is terribly cold, and we feel the cold a good deal

in barrack life even after one has begun to get a bit hardened. To-day one of our duties was to empty our straw beds, and get new ones filled with clean straw. It is an odd spectacle to see 200 or 300 men at this task. We accept it as 'all in the day's work.' We see very little of our officers, at this stage of our training at all events. We are almost entirely drilled by instructing sergeants, and they, too, give us the lectures we have. To-day, however, we do have a lecture from an officer upon (1) Discipline, (2) A Short History of the Regiment."

* * * * *

"Yesterday some of our fellows were promoted to be lance-corporals—three who had only just arrived here. There is often dissatisfaction about these appointments, and in military life, as in my own profession—and indeed in all callings—there is a good deal of plotting and intriguing. For the most part, however, the stripe is not very eagerly sought after."

[I must say an additional word on this subject. Two days before the appointments were made one of the lance-corporals, who had known of me in civil life, asked me if I would like a stripe. "It can be arranged," he said meaningly. It was in fact a matter of payment. Now I particularly wanted not to have a stripe, so I was not interested in the proposal; but I may be pardoned for saying that I should have been more than equal to the financial possibilities that were suggested to me.

At Portsmouth I had a bad time at the hands of some N.C.O.'s, but I do not positively assert that my

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disinclination to pay for advancement was connected with it. As an example of my rough treatment, I may say that I was on one occasion hustled in the ranks and threatened with the butt end of a rifle by an instructing sergeant. An officer posted on the parade ground to supervise instructing N.C.O.'s was present at the time; he turned and walked into an office.]

* * * * *

"It is a month since I joined the Army, and they say the first month is the worst. I wonder whether that will be so in my case; time will prove.

"To-day we were drafted into another part of the barracks—this time into a room meant to hold sixteen, but into which we managed to crowd twenty-four.

"We have a lance-corporal in charge of the room. He is very young, but I cannot help noticing that from the very start he has seemed to single me out for his special care. Why, I do not know. But if there is a bit of meat over, it is always, 'Can you do with this?' And so in various small attentions. In our last barrack-room there was a lance-corporal to five rooms, and the one in the next room to me was quite a boy. One day he said: 'In Oxford were you in business in ——?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'I was telegraph-boy,' he said, 'and have often delivered telegrams to you.' He, too, was very kind, and would never let me do my floor cleaning or similar jobs if he could fix them on anybody else. I believe the reason was that I always showed a willingness to help the lance-corporal, while many did not. But I do not always get such consideration. The sergeant of our squadron is young,

but really very hard, and I have an instinctive feeling that he has no great affection for me. When I was in another company the sergeant used to preface all his remarks by saying 'Education's no good!' Thank God! he never seemed to suspect that I had been educated."

* * * * *

"I have been orderly-man to-day, and as such I have cleaned the floor, blacked the grates, fetched the food, washed the plates, etc.—a very dirty job.

"In the barracks, apart from the barrack-rooms, are (1) a cookhouse, (2) store-rooms, (3) guard-room (for prisoners and the guard at the gate), (4) orderly-room, (5) garrison reading-room, (6) recreation-room, (7) canteen. A canteen is in three departments—namely, coffee-room, at which you can get tea (but not coffee!), boiled rice, and cake; a 'wet canteen,' at which you can get beer only; and the grocery, or 'dry,' canteen, where you can get jam, biscuits, tinned things (only a few), cigarettes, soap, etc."

[As an orderly-man one of my duties was to attend at the store to draw bread and meat for the day. It turned out to be nothing short of a great ceremonial. There were orderlies from each company and from the officers and band; each party was in charge of a corporal, and we were lined up outside. Inside there were two N.C.O.'s—sergeant-majors, I believe—and helpers of lesser rank; and outside there was a sergeant. Then two officers arrived, and as they did so the aforesaid sergeant fiercely shouted "Attention!" Next "A" Company and the corporal present saluted,

then "B" Company, and so on; and then the sergeant himself saluted, and then the sergeant-majors saluted, and finally I think we all saluted over again. In the presence of all this company the bread and meat were weighed and measured out, and after saluting we took it to the cookhouse.

It is difficult to imagine that, with all this solemnity—about which I should make no complaint if the achievement had been as precise as the methods—anything could have been wrong; but I tell you that on this day I did not get and had no chance of getting, my full rations, and I was left hungry. If I am pressed, I will say when, where, and how the rations disappeared; but of this I can speak later, when I had become a more finished soldier and disposed of rations in France. I resume my diary.]

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"I have had an opportunity during the last few days of taking a survey of my fellow-occupants in this my new barrack-room. I have not yet had an opportunity of placing them all, but of the twenty-four I can place the following: three farm labourers, one shell-turner, one cab-driver, one clerk, one motor-cab driver, one photographer's assistant, one ironmonger's assistant, one barber's assistant, one iron-caster, one zinc-worker, and one haulier's man. To me the most interesting of these is the cab-driver. He used to be on the St. Giles's rank in Oxford, and he and I have a great crowd of mutual memories. Sitting, as I suppose he did, for hours on his cab-rank, he seems to

know all about the business and private life of many of our Oxford people. He is very interesting."

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"The physical exercises are very severe. One evening one of my pals, a man of forty-one, showed me an evening paper, and drew my attention to an answer given in Parliament stating that men over thirty-eight went through different training from those under that age. He also told me in picturesque language what he thought of the Minister who gave the answer. During every day of my training in England I have had my old friend of forty-one on my right in the ranks, and a youth of twenty-two on my left, and the three of us have daily and every day exactly the same training."

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"Some of our fellows go to take part in the demonstration in aid of National Service with other units. I wonder what they are going to do with the herd of men that they will collect! I have formed the opinion since I have been in the Army that four million men, fairly carefully selected, are of much more value than seven millions of men herded regardless of age, health, and past occupations."

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"An inspecting officer turned up to inspect us at bayonet exercise. I was much amused at the obvious uneasiness of the instructors, and their brave attempt to show a confidence which they did not feel. To-day I

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have had two months in the Army, and the second has certainly gone better and quicker than the first. The work has no doubt been harder and more exacting, but use has blunted our sensitiveness to many of the little hardships which used to irk us at first. Jupiter declined to stop the hailstones when the frog complained that they hurt him, but he promised to harden his skin. Our skins are certainly tougher."

CHAPTER III

FINAL TRAINING AND TO FRANCE

OUR preliminary training at Cambridge Barracks drew to a close, and rumour had it that we were going to one of the forts at Cosham. "Rumour," I say, for I found that in the Army, even in the most ordinary matters, we were never taken into the confidence of our superiors, nor they apparently into the confidence of theirs. There were simply growing and accumulating signs that we were going to move, and ultimately, without any direct order so far as I could see, we marched out of Cambridge Barracks *en route*—but this we only learned on arrival!—for Fort Widley.

On this occasion the method led to an incident which was at least amusing. Among us was a Tommy who had given a good deal of trouble by twice absenting himself, once returning under escort re-established in civil clothing; and with him indeed disobedience to orders was chronic, whether by design as a means of "working his ticket," or from mere mental feebleness—I think the latter. Now he was found at the last moment entirely unprepared either to move or parade. His sergeant's wrath may be imagined; but his defence was "childlike and bland." "I have had no orders," he said, "and I do nothing without orders."

It was a beautiful afternoon as we left Cambridge Barracks, and I well remember the first sight which one gets of the Forts Widley, Southwick, and Purbrook, on approaching Cosham and the ridge from which these forts stand out. The structure of the forts and the surroundings alike conjure up to one's mind the wars of old, and indeed I believe as military structures these edifices are more suitable for their old-time purpose than for modern warfare.

The present military need had outgrown the housing accommodation of the fort barracks, and so on arrival, after the last weary lap up the side of the ridge, we found that we were to be housed in military huts on the roof, so to speak, of the fort; for there, too, is the parade-ground, the fort being cut into the cliff formed by the ridge.

At this period of my military career I had formed a great friendship with a lance-corporal who was second-in-command of my platoon, and to whose friendship, particularly in softening the hostility to me of the sergeant of the platoon, I owed a great deal. The lance-corporal was not a time-serving soldier, but was nevertheless a soldier of some standing, for he was no longer a recruit, but had been kept back from service abroad on account of his proficiency in teaching others. In civil life he was a travelling photographer; he was well educated, and a gentleman. He so engineered it that he and I slept next to each other in the hut. I may observe that you sleep as you march into a hut, and this is so well recognized a rule that you frequently find, after making all arrangements for

being with pals, that they are entirely upset by the simple fact that, as you march up, the separation line for different huts intersects the little group of pals; so then you make other pals. However, on this occasion I got next to my lance-corporal pal, and I derived much comfort from his constant friendship and particularly our talks after "lights out." Our beds here were three planks and a straw mattress.

I find the following entries in my diary during our training at Fort Widley, and I set them forth as examples of our daily doings :

"To-day the seventh week of our training begins. We are to have a few days' bomb course. To-day's programme : 6.30, section drill ; 8.45, lecture on bombs, lasting till 12.30 ; 2 p.m., throwing blank bombs ; 3.30, drill in extended order. It is bitterly cold."

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"To-day's time-table : 6.30 to 7.30, arms drill ; 8.45 to 9.45, lecture ; 9.45 to 12.30, firing rifle grenades, and spending the greater part of the time in a dug-out, where we played cards ; 2 to 2.30, putting detonators into hand-bombs—a not altogether safe occupation on account of the bravery and ignorance of my pals ; 3.30 to 4.30, field drill in extended order. At the outset I got into very serious trouble by taking a wrong move, and my sergeant tells me that he shall report me to the orderly-room for punishment. Anyway, it will be an experience."

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"My sergeant has apparently overlooked my default of yesterday. At all events, I am not reported; in the Army punishment is often a matter of luck."

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"Routine of the day: 6.30, company drill; 8.45 to 11, bayonet exercise and physical drill; 11 to 12.30, musketry."

* *

"A parade at 9.25, and then to the garrison church. We had a very indifferent sermon. In the afternoon I went for a walk with a chum, his wife, and child, and we had tea in some gardens."

* *

"The great event of to-day is that we are told that to-morrow we are to go to Purbrook to be reviewed by the General for the district, and we are given very precise instructions as to our appearance. Everything is to be cleaned and polished, even a brass screw which is on the side of the rifle. So that there may be no mistakes, we are to have an hour off drill in which to clean our things, and the routine is altered so that we do not have to wear our equipment in the afternoon, and hence get it dirty. Roughly, it means that we shall lose to-day and to-morrow, which should have been two days of critical importance in our training. I think it was Nero who fiddled while Rome was burning."

* *

"We had physical drill between 6.30 and 7.30, so that we did not get a chance of dirtying our equip-

ment or rifle, which we do not use at physical exercises. At 9 o'clock we paraded—very spick and span. We then marched to Purbrook, a distance of two and a half miles, where we arrived dusty and dirty. We were divided into squadrons, one to give an arms and drill exhibition, another bayonet exercises, another bombing, and so on. I was in the drill squad. The General arrived with the usual following at his heels. He inspected us for about two and a half minutes, and then went to other squadrons. Later we marched back here. In the afternoon, in a disjointed way, we continued our training. To-night at 8.45 we go on night operations."

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"Last night we marched off about 9 o'clock with full pack and a quantity of blank ammunition. A number of men were told off as cooks, and started off with cocoa, saucepans, and firewood. We marched to Fort Purbrook, and on arrival met a guide, who conducted us to the trenches, which we had to take over from another force. We manned these trenches, and to make matters realistic, from time to time rockets were sent up. We were told that we should be attacked during the night. We sent out patrols, and later three of us (I being one) went out as 'spies.' We crawled on our stomachs for about 250 yards, close to the enemy trenches. But then a rocket went up, and this disclosed to us that the enemy had also three 'spies' crouching on their stomachs in the wet grass. Shortly afterwards, amidst a good deal of confusion, our

trenches were rushed, clay bombs being largely used. But I did not see much of the fight, as I was returning from my spying job, and one of our fellows got hung up in barbed wire. I understand, however, that at the moment of attack our fellows were engaged in drinking cocoa. From the point of view of the humorist, the whole thing was more laughable than instructive. But to be at this game in the small hours and to find it laughable, one wants to be seventeen and not thirty-seven."

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"To-day there is a notice in orders that there has been a waste of bread. God knows that has never happened in this hut, but we expect the notice to prove a preliminary to cutting down our bread allowance."

And so the days at Widley drew to a close—for this stage of our training was over, and the next was a week at Fort Goma for a special firing course. But I must add a few words about Widley and its surroundings. Had I not been a soldier there I would, in the days to come, have returned to it for a holiday, for it was a healthy spot, commanding fine views, and there were happy evenings in the spring with the setting sun for the stage footlights, and I was at times nearly happy with my lance-corporal.

But in the Army all ends, and the day of departure arrived and the parade; and then we moved out of the fort gate over the drawbridge (bridging only space), down the hill to Cosham, and forward. My diary reads:

"During our march I see that my next-door neighbour looks terribly ill, and I relieve him of his rifle. He sticks it gamely until the last mile, when he falls out a complete wreck, evidently very ill. We arrive at 5.5, and though we get through all right we are in a very weak condition. We are in huts adjoining the forts. There are a very large number of them. In addition to the huts there are several washhouses, one canteen (grocers', coffee, and wet combined)—a very nice canteen, too—and a number of cookhouses. It takes us about fifteen minutes to be settled as thoroughly in our new quarters as if we had never moved.

"We are aroused at 6.45, and have breakfast at 7.30. Twelve of us are told off as markers for the company, and for this purpose we parade and march off to the range, a distance of three-quarters of a mile. Markers stand under the targets, duly protected, manipulate the targets, and signal the hits. It is not a bad job."

One word of marking before I pass. On the first morning of my shooting experience I had to act as marker for "K" Company, and "K" Company was comprised of "Casualties"—*i.e.*, men who had served at the front, had been wounded, and were undergoing training before returning to the front. If you got a certain percentage of marks—I forget the percentage—which entitled you to the grade of marksman, the rate of pay was affected. And so at breakfast one of the "K" Company came up to me and said: "Look here, Rooky (Recruit), you are marking for us? I am going to shoot on 3 target. You mark that target and

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put me right." I replied, "I will do what I can," though I was fully determined and resolute to do nothing of the kind. How green I was! Or was it rather that, although a lawyer, I still had elementary ideas of honesty?

I learnt afterwards it was all part of the "system," and looking at it in that light I should oblige a pal now. Here is an example of how things are worked: A pal of mine, who no doubt had soldierly qualities but who as a marksman fell short of even my own indifferent prowess, confidently told me on the first day that he should be a marksman. Well, he was, and I was not. Probably he would say I avoided the honour because I feared as a result of my skill to be selected for the dangerous job of a sniper. Be that as it may, I had my chance of glory, for on the final day a friendly sergeant with a permanent job at Fort Goma asked me if I would like to go to his hut and see the record of my scores. On the way he asked ingratiatingly: "What score do you think you have made?" "I don't know," I replied indifferently. "What score would you like to have made?" he said, still more ingratiatingly. "Tell me before we balance."

To return to my diary:

"We have a great day before us. Breakfast—or rather an instalment of it in the shape of some bread and cheese—is at 4.45 a.m. My next-door sleeping companion is now a dear old clay-digger, aged forty-one, of whom I will say more later. I mention him now because he has the reputation of always being up

at 4 a.m., and I have the reputation of always being up immediately after him. To-day we all get up at 3.45. At 5.15 we parade, and in marching order proceed to a range. Here for three hours we advance in full marching order in sections, firing volleys at different ranges as we advance, and the hits on targets are recorded in favour of each section. After reading the score, one is a little encouraged in the idea that in an advance from the trenches the average chance of survival is better than one had imagined. At 8.30 we return and have our second instalment of breakfast. At 9.30 we parade again, having in the meanwhile cleaned our rifles, ourselves, our equipment, our basins and plates. From 9.30 to 2.30 we shoot the remainder of the competition. The excitement of the competition is shooting fifteen rounds in one minute, loading five rounds at a time. It is not an easy thing to do. The top score to-day was 145—remarkably good. I have not inquired either my own or the lowest score. They may possibly be identical. We return to the huts at 2.45, hungry, hot, and weary. To-night we parade at 9 o'clock, and we expect to be out for two hours.

“Now a word more about my good friend the clay-digger. He is thick-set, square-faced, with black hair and moustache and keen brown eyes. By his own confession, in private life he was a keen and successful poacher, with a dash of apple and other petty stealing. I have discussed many things with him, and his brain in my judgment is the keenest I have found. He cannot do squad drill, because if he is told to turn left he turns slowly and deliberately right. His name is

never off the lips of the sergeant, except when mine is upon them. He cannot march, because he almost always puts down his left foot when the remaining 297 men put down the right; but then, as he truly says, he is the only man in step. Again, he cannot do arms drill because he is quite indifferent as to whether he puts his rifle on his left or his right shoulder, or under his arm instead of over it. Furthermore, even now he has only a hazy idea of the difference between 'shoulder' and 'slope arms.' And, too, it must be confessed that he cannot do physical exercises because he starts when all the others end. Lastly, he cannot shoot, and cannot 'bayonet fight.' And yet of all men I have met in the Army—officers, N.C.O.'s, and men—it is the clay-digger I should desire to go into battle with—a man deliberate, resolute, resourceful, untiring. He will never flinch, never retreat. If ever we get to battle my eyes will look to that man, and they will look with many other eyes. I have marched miles behind him, and have seen him, always with the same step, the same stride, the same time, the same empty pipe in his mouth—never fresh, never tired. There is another fellow in this room who will always be with us—red-haired, untidy, and, be it confessed, frequently dirty and always late. He will undoubtedly arrive late on the battlefield, without his coat and with one putty on and one off; but when he gets there he will stay, with his pouting lips. He will never look back. And he will never eat or drink while there are any of his pals near him who have got nothing."

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"After I had concluded my notes of yesterday six of us had a great banquet, for we learned that it was to be our last night at Goma, and in view of a big march to-morrow it was necessary that all eatables should be consumed to date. We therefore made a common stock of respective parcels which we had been lucky enough to receive. It was indeed a great feast, starting with *hors d'œuvre*, followed by soup, fish, meat, cheese, and dessert. It must not be supposed, however, that we committed a breach of the Food Controller's regulations, for our limited supplies made it impossible for more than two people to touch more than two courses. We were fortunate in having an ex-waiter as one of our party, for this enabled us to display our feast to the best advantage, and the absence of plates and the paucity of forks (three instead of six) was hardly noticed. After our meal, we adjourned to the canteen for beer, for we are not allowed to have beer in the barrack-room. A merry evening closed at 9 p.m., for at 9.15 we had to go on night operations. These consisted of marching to the range, manning the trenches, and then firing at men targets, (1) illuminated only by two small bonfires, and (2) illuminated by rockets. Our hits were recorded. We returned to our quarters about 1 a.m., and then to bed after a fairly strenuous day."

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"To-day we get up early (4.30), for there is much to do. There is a sort of general understanding, based upon rumours, that to-morrow we leave Goma for Purbrook, and that then we are to have our final six

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days' leave. We start the day by the prosaic task of scouring our bed-boards, then packing in our kit-bags our worldly possessions; then we clean the room; lastly we have breakfast. At 8.15 we parade in full marching order, and at 8.30 we leave Goma. We arrive at Purbrook in fine order, notwithstanding the heat, although, as I recorded a week ago, after the outer journey we arrived in a rather dilapidated condition."

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"On our arrival at Purbrook we have the joyful news that in an hour and a half we are to start off on leave. Schoolboy-like excitement prevails. In that hour and a half we have to get into our best things, and obtain our ration money for the period of our leave, which, whatever its amount, we take with the same solemnity with which we take our pay. We present ourselves before a table, at which sit an officer and a quartermaster-sergeant. Names are called out, and each owner of the money, when his turn comes, sings out 'Yes,' steps smartly up to the table, salutes the officer, receives his money, and withdraws. I have seen this done for a shilling! But discipline is discipline. Next we have to attend before the sergeant-major of the company to get our passes and our railway-vouchers. All this finished, we snatch a hasty meal, consisting of bread and meat which we have brought from our last station, and which has not improved by being carried in the heat. Then we parade, and march under our officer to the station, and off we go home for final leave."

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"Leave gives time to reflect, and there is much food for reflection. It is always difficult to give an accurate record of one's impressions, because if you write at the time of the event, the picture is too highly coloured; while if you write later and at leisure, though you may write more soberly, you write less vividly, for your impressions have lost their sharp edge under the weight of later impressions. I will, however, here put down certain general impressions left on my mind by my period of military training, but not necessarily in the order in which they have presented themselves.

"(1) The splendid qualities of the men with whom one is associated. Substantially they are of one class, and a coarse, meaningless language covers, though it cannot hide, a fine character. (2) I estimate (by calculating the total area of my buttons and trappings, and multiplying it by the number of times I have cleaned them) that since I have been in the Army I have cleaned one acre, one rood, and thirteen poles of brass. (3) The absence of drunkenness in the modern soldier is not wholly due to the absence of means of getting drunk. (4) Thoughts as to the training and administration of our Army."

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"Leave ends to-day, and our passes expire at midnight. Nevertheless you are in order if you return to barracks before roll-call in the morning. There must be great grief to-night—good-bye to wives and children, the farewell of lovers. One is almost tempted to think bitterly about 'equality of sacrifice.' I make no personal complaint, but I think those to

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whom so small a stake in the country has been accorded in the past perhaps may not understand why they are invited, and indeed compelled, to make so great a sacrifice. I think, also, perhaps, that a final leave is a refinement of cruelty. At all events, I believe that many soldiers would like to be ordered off without it. I doubt if a soldier ever requires greater courage than when he says good-bye.

"On the way back to Purbrook I meet numerous friends. It is a little dismal walking at midnight into a dark barrack-room, where the lights must not be lit—into a room which you have never seen before. We have to find some blankets in which to get a night's sleep. However, I am more lucky than most, for my good friend the lance-corporal, who has made Army life much better for me than it would otherwise have been, got to the barracks in the early evening, and, finding that he and I are still in the same room, made up a sort of bed for me by his bed, and all I had to do was to undress and get in. By undressing I mean the removal of boots, trousers, coat, and cap. To-night I am going to forget everything in sleep."

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"This has been an easy day; no early morning parade. 9 to 10.30, marching to Southwick to get new rifles; 10.30 to 12, bomb-throwing and bomb drill; 12 to 1, kit inspection. Now, I have never been very good at keeping a number of items, clothing or otherwise, either in my possession or in order; therefore, kit inspection used to bring on nervous depression. But I have learned the ropes a bit, and now it has no

terrors for me. Directly I heard there was going to be a kit inspection, I walked round to my chums in another hut, and borrowed the things I was short of. Thus I made a good array. Purposely I left out of the display a shirt and socks, because I lost these in the wash, and I wanted the officer to ask me about it. He did. 'Where are your spare shirt and socks?' he cries fiercely. 'You will remember, sir,' I reply, 'they were lost by the authorities.' 'Ah, yes,' he murmurs, 'I will see to it.' Instinctively I know I shall finish my military career without a shirt.

"To-day, the morrow of our last leave, is sorrowful; the men are all a bit down. We have been split up into different rooms. I have lost a lot of old friends, and particularly I miss the old clay-digger. However, we shall unite again perhaps. Four of our men have failed to put in an appearance since leave."

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"It is three months to-day since I joined the Army. The second month seemed shorter than the first, and the third shorter than the second. The first six weeks were terribly hard.

"This afternoon I played banker for a time; it is quite the soldier's game."

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"Hush! We are to be inspected by a General. There is a great deal of preparation, and some natural uneasiness amongst us. The Tommies sum up the situation tersely in their own language: 'There'll be a lot of eyewash.'

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"We have had a severe day, and one of our number was injured going over the bayonet course. The barrack-room to-night is at fever-heat in the clearing-up line for our inspection, and it simply reeks with blanco and brass polish."

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"The General was with us this morning, and I will draw a discreet veil over the proceedings. This afternoon we went through our final gas training, as follows: At 2 p.m. we paraded and marched half a mile to the gas-hut. There were tests in getting the gas-helmets on, etc. At 2.45 we entered the gas-chamber. A medical officer enters the hut with us, and from time to time looks through the goggles of the men to see if they are all right. We remained in the hut three minutes; it was a not over-pleasing experience. The gas saturates your clothing and turns all metal black. (There is a good deal of brass-cleaning to-night.)"

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"It is wet and cold to-day. The feature of the morning's doings was the hour's drill by the regimental sergeant-major. He was absolutely furious with us for the exhibition we gave before the General yesterday, but then it was no good shouting to-day."

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"This afternoon, at the request of the Chaplain, we were marched to church to attend a farewell service, in case we leave before Sunday. The church is a sweet little building, about half a mile from here, standing on

the slope of a hill. It was ideal for the impressive and simple service which this was bound to be. Hymns sounded to us as they had never sounded before, and everybody was moved by the obvious sincerity of the young Chaplain, who had just returned from the front. One incident alone marred this last event. Just before we started to church, three Nonconformists were taken from our ranks and sent to do orderly work. It seemed to them and to us that the unity which had existed in all drills and trials must end at this simple and short service, although all of us claim the same God. This view is not original ; it was expressed to me by another Tommy as we walked to church. We had night operations to-day, and I will speak of them to-morrow."

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"To-day we have kit inspection. At 6.30 an orderly corporal enters the barrack-room, and tells us that at 6.30 to-morrow everything is to be in order for inspection, ready to put on, and that we leave for the front at 11.10. Our next order is to attend at the store-room, where we have handed to us a knife, a tin cup, bandages, chemicals, and soap. The next step is to put all our things together and to make a final cleaning of our things—which takes longer to do than to write of. Finally we adjourn to the canteen and have a pint apiece. There is not a sign to-night of insobriety. We scrape together a few things, and have a last supper-party. My two young friends from Cowley join us at supper, but they are not permitted to go out with us (though they are anxious to do it) because they are under age.

"The night finishes with a fearful thunderstorm on the hills."

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"I am up at 4.30. By 6.30 we have everything displayed on the beds. It is curious how, in what might seem a crucial moment, things are taken as a matter of course. There is neither excitement nor sentiment. I will set down the things we carry over and above what we wear—one shirt, two pairs of socks, one pair of pants, one towel, a piece of soap, a topcoat, knife, fork, and spoon, razor and shaving-brush, tooth-brush, housewife, chemicals and bandages, oil for rifle, cap and comforter."

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"Before leaving for the front we were inspected by our Commanding Officer—the first time I had seen him. This took but a few minutes, and then we started, headed by the band, for Cosham Station. As we left the fort we had to pass a number of huts and tents. A great crowd was not to be expected to see us off, for drill and training were going on as usual; but every orderly man and every sick man turned out from hut and tent to see us pass. They solemnly stood to attention and saluted, and then cried, 'Good-luck, boys!' Two little friends from Cowley turned out to say 'Good-bye!' as we marched. As we passed through the town we had a great reception if a sad one, for the crowd was almost entirely composed of women, and a large number were crying and very many were in black. I was very much struck by an old

man who stood alone near the station, crying and sobbing: 'Luck! boys, luck!'

"One of our boys who fell sick a few days ago, and was lying ill in bed yesterday, against the doctor's orders presented himself on parade, and is with us to-day. In the train we eat bread and meat, part of the day's ration served out to us. As the train proceeded we were joined by other Tommies. We arrived at our port of embarkation. We were told to place our packs on the ground in front of us (so we knew where to fall in), and we were told that we could wander about the docks for five hours. We saw wonderful sights. As troops arrived they fell out as we did; some sat down by their packs, a few falling asleep; others went into the canteens. There were many of all types, callings, and creeds in that assemblage, all answering to the call of the nation's needs. We went aboard, but after the transport had moved from the docks we anchored, and were given to understand that we should not go forward for at least twenty-four hours. In the meantime we had put on our life-belts, and walked about with no more concern than if we had put on our topcoats."

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"Well, we are aboard—bees in a jam-pot. Our first business is to draw rations for twenty-four hours, which we then distribute among our party. The chances are we shall have consumed the lot in six hours, and shall go hungry for eighteen hours. Rations consist of bully-beef (a small tin each), biscuits, and tea. We also have some cocoa, which we kept from the morn-

ing's rations. On the deck are two coppers, from which we get boiling water to make our tea, each in his own tin. There are also three tubs of water on the deck, in which we wash. After about 175 have washed in each tub, the specific gravity of the contents of the tubs has been considerably increased. The last thing to-night is to look round for a corner to lie upon for sleep. It is not easy to find one, but I discover a cul-de-sac passage which looks hopeful, and I curl up like a cat. I have not been there long before an Australian comes to me and says: 'Old chap, I can find you something better than this. Come on!' He takes me to a cabin which he and two other Australians had collared. We have a merry time, and they make me a fine bed on the floor with their coats. The Australians, by the way, have earned golden opinions from us. They have more money than we have got, but they are very generous to us, and while we are with them we shall be in good company."

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In after months I came a good deal in contact with Australians. They had a military standard of their own. They did not pretend to have any discipline; they did not submerge their identity in rules and regulations; they simply fought. As a Colonel friend I met once put it to me: "The Australians did well on your right yesterday—they always do well. They steal our things; they get drunk; they kick up a row and they insult you. But we forgive them all."

My diary goes on:

"And now we are off across the Channel. It was fine to see all the shipping about us. The black crew worked like Trojans during our passage. It was a curious sight to see the troopers rise from their rough couches, rush to the tubs, and then have breakfast. Now there is scarcely a foot of deck that is not a breakfast-table."

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We landed at Havre in the early morning. Can I ever forget that landing or the impression it made on me that Britain could not lose in the war into which with a splendid prodigality she was flinging her manhood! Several transports had arrived with us, and the occupants lined up at the docks there like a great living wall. The place seemed alive with British troops engaged in some work or other, and there was, too, a good sprinkling of German prisoners. I watched their faces as the new and never-ending line of British soldiers marched past. I miscalculated—I judged the end to be nearer than it was. Did they?

CHAPTER IV

AT "OUR BASE" IN FRANCE

WE left the Havre Docks and marched through the town—well known to me in times of peace. I remember in the early days of the war standing near the British Consulate and watching and cheering a Highland battalion passing through. The sight impressed me, but I never then expected that I should march through the same square a Tommy like one of those I cheered.

From the docks we went to one of the rest-camps on the hills commanding and watching Le Havre. It was a real rest-camp, for we did no work and had little exercise here for three days. And then away again.

We left the rest-camp in great force. I hope the German prisoners whom we met, and who raised their eyes with a queer, furtive look as we passed, were impressed by the display we made. There were two funny little incidents *en route* which I may record. First, as we passed, two small dogs were standing on their hind-legs each holding a miniature rifle. Secondly, some French schoolboys joined us in the march, and one little fellow, aged, I should think, not more than four years, and dressed as an officer in a French regiment (a pretty effect), took hold of my hand and kept step with me for so long a distance that

finally I had to tell him to go back. He then very charmingly gave me a flower and went.

At the docks we embarked upon a river-going steamer, for we were bound for that pleasant journey by the Seine from Le Havre to Rouen. It would have been more comfortable if the boat had been less packed, but the day was one of glorious sunshine, and we had a most delightful trip on board through perfect scenery. As we passed through and between small towns, we had a great reception from the inhabitants. We landed at Rouen, and commenced that wearing if petty march, known to so many, from the docks to the great British camp on the hills beyond the city.

We came to one of a number of camps interspersed with hospitals, and each camp was divided into smaller camps, and each small camp represented the base of a battalion. Each consisted of one or more wood structures for meals and cooking, a galvanized building with a water-pipe and a number of tubs which represented the washing-house, and the tents necessary to accommodate the men received as drafts for and waiting to join their battalion.

I make the following extracts from my diary while at this camp :

"We are settling down in fresh quarters. Yesterday we had a big thunderstorm in the afternoon, and it returned during the night. The rain came through our tent, but most of us kept pretty dry with the assistance of our waterproof sheets. I still find the boards, with my pack for a pillow, a pretty hard resting-place. We

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have a very good canteen now, and can get bread, which is always acceptable. We are having a comparatively quiet time. To-day our only parade has been a further gas experiment. I can still taste the gas. Our meals are taken here, as at Cowley, in a dining-room. To-day we had porridge—made of biscuits—for breakfast.”

* * * * *

“Last night was a trying one. It rained a good deal before we went to bed, and the tents were very wet.”

* * * * *

“Here is to-day’s routine: Up at 5 a.m.; breakfast, 6.30; parade, 7.30. We lunched on the parade ground—our fare of bully-beef and one biscuit; dinner at 4.30; tea at 5. Some people may think it rather queer that we should have dinner and tea within half an hour of each other. I don’t know that I can quite explain it, but we never have more than a quarter of an hour for a meal, and we were quite ready for tea after another quarter of an hour’s break. When we go to the parade-ground, which is a good distance away, we never return at midday.”

Now a word of the parade-ground. It was called “the bull-ring,” and was about three miles from our camp. The name will call up horrors to the memory of many who went on that ring day after day, always as a link between England and the battalion in the lines. It was a vast track of sandy soil surrounded by

firs; and it was said that here Napoleon trained and prepared his great armies.

Here, during that pause of fourteen to twenty-one days between landing and joining the battalion, we used to march in the heat (at the time of my visit) in all our kit and with steel hats, and here we used to go through various drills with unvarying monotony. Sometimes we thought it was unnecessary. Nevertheless, it was a magnificent sight to see the troops arrive on the parade-grounds, and a large staff was required to regulate the passage of the troops on the roads to and from the ground.

Our training, as I say, varied. One afternoon I dug a trench with pick and shovel. We worked in pairs, and my companion, who had had some experience in digging trenches for gas mains in Oxford, told me that "he had seen people get on better than I," but that I "handled the pick and shovel as if I had done it before." The instructor (here they were distinguished by yellow armlets, and so we called them "the canaries") gave his verdict. "I think," he said, "you'll dig quicker when you get some bullets round you."

Life was not without its incidents at this camp. I will give a few from my diary :

"Last night I went to the dry canteen to make a purchase. An officer stood in front of me with another officer. He was also purchasing at the canteen, and after receiving his change — twopence — he turned round to me and said, 'Take this towards a drink,

Tommy,' and gave me twopence. It was a kindly little act, and enabled me to buy some bread.

"To-day some of our fellows have gone to the docks for fatigue work. They got up at 4 a.m. in order to do it. It is a pretty little sight in the Army to see men, particularly old soldiers, dodging, or trying to dodge, a fatigue. They look so innocent and sweet as they stroll round one side of a tent while a sergeant is looking for them on the other, and when they are caught they are so surprised, and indeed shocked, at the idea that it should have been thought that they were trying to escape. This was one of the sights that I witnessed at 4 a.m.—I saw a sergeant and two men meeting in this little game. The language of the sergeant was bright, cheerful, illuminating, and instructive.

"The table etiquette of the Army needs some picking up, as it varies a good deal at different places. I well remember that at Cowley the dining-room sergeant, brave man as he certainly is, would have swooned if one of us had turned up with a cap on or a button undone; while here one might almost turn up without one's trousers. I well remember how at Cowley I was severely reprimanded because I wiped my plate with bread in order to prevent a collision between cold mutton grease and hot plum-duff, while here one might almost lick one's plate and yet escape censure or notice."

During our stay at the base camp on occasions our day at the bull-ring was relieved by a day of fatigue

work at the docks, and to complete the experience of life at this camp I must transcribe from my diary my record of a sample day.

"Parade at 4 a.m., breakfast at 4.30, and then a march to the docks. It was pouring when we got up, but as I was already wet through that was a matter of little moment. Before we started, and while we were on parade, an order was read out to us to the effect that we were about to work at the Government base stores, that we might and should be searched, that if any articles similar to those in the stores were found in our possession we should be deemed to have stolen the article, and that we were not allowed to take any food with us. Now this was rather sad hearing, because I have generally carried an Army biscuit in my pocket as a reserve, and I had marched some miles towards the docks before I had decided that it would be discreet to dispose of my biscuit. I missed that biscuit sorely before the close of the day.

"After breakfast we marched to the docks, a distance of some five miles. The docks were interesting. There were crowds of our Tommies, crowds of A.S.C. men, and crowds of German prisoners, with some of whom I worked at the close of the day. We were all engaged alike in moving stores from ships and stacking them, but I don't think the German prisoners got up as early as we did. I was told off with others to stack large tins of Army biscuits. Now, I have never been used to the work of a wharf navvy, and I found it very hard. While others could lift the boxes

on their backs with ease, to me it was difficult; but my pals were very good in seeing that I did not do my fair share, or anything like it. It was interesting to see the Indians handling their own meat, as their religion requires.

"Well, we worked from about 7 a.m. to 12 noon, when we knocked off for dinner. A pal and I sat down near a man in another regiment, and he looked at our rations, compared them with his, and then gave each of us a large portion of his supply. I mention this as an example of the generosity that one soldier habitually shows to another. It was not a case of giving away a superfluity, for we were all hungry."

Generally one's life goes on quietly from day to day, and yet in a single day the whole outlook of one's life may be changed. This is nowhere more true than in the Army. One morning I was resting in my tent when I was called on parade by a sergeant. The sergeant selected twenty-four men, of whom twelve were for a firing party and twelve to act as bearers for some German prisoners who had died in hospital. I was of the firing party. We had a very hasty dinner, and then went to the hospital, where we found we had four bodies to escort. There were the hearse and we twenty-four, but no other followers. We marched some three and a half miles to a little village on the outskirts of the town, and to a pretty cemetery, where already a large number of Germans have been buried. We were met by an English Chaplain, and after full funeral honours had been accorded to our dead enemies we marched back.

I was impressed by an incident *en route*. A man rushed from a shop and shouted at us in French: "How many—two?" One of us replied: "No, four." The man rushed back to tell his friends, evidently overjoyed.

We arrived back just after 5 o'clock. The orderly sergeant rushed at me directly I got in and cried: "Why did you go on this fatigue? You had no business to! You are going to join the Royal Berkshires to go up the line." I simply replied that he had sent me on the fatigue—a reply which seemed both to him and me unanswerable. I rushed off to a medical examination which was then going on; it took me about one minute to get through it. At 6 we paraded with our kit; our badges, etc., were taken from us, and we had ceased to belong to our old regiment. I was of course sorry to leave my regiment, in two battalions of which I had served. We expected to go up to our battalion and the lines next day.

I looked round my friends and wondered how in truth they felt. Everybody, I suppose, wonders how others feel as they approach so great a trial. The stakes—one's health, limbs, senses, life—were high, and I confess that at this stage I had a cold fear. But I looked at my friends, and I knew that however they might feel, there was not one of them who would leave the party even if he had the chance.

On the morrow we paraded with full pack, to which was added a good quantity of ball ammunition and a ration bag. We were also served with a day's rations, and in addition, for the good of the cause, I carried

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two pounds of tea and sugar. At half-past one we left our base, and other drafts from other bases collected outside. We marched headed by a band. It was intensely hot during our march, and the heat culminated in a thunderstorm. Under the drenching rain and in close air we found it difficult to keep going with our heavy packs.

The march to the station was marked by incidents of interest. One excited French lady, in default of a knowledge of the English language, rushed into the road, demonstrating in dumb show how she would dispose of the hated *Boche*. The methods she indicated were summary. But perhaps the most interesting spectacle was in passing the huge hospital, where the men who had been temporarily "knocked out" in the great fight turned out to see those who were going to fill the blanks they had left.

On our arrival at the station we found as big a train as I have ever seen awaiting us. It was composed chiefly of closed goods-trucks. Into one of these forty-three of us managed to pack ourselves, and the journey started. From the very beginning of our journey there was one, and only one, sign of a great war in progress, and that was that each side of the railway line was strewn with used bully-beef and other tins. Later in the journey the presence of German prisoners, coloured men from the French colonies working on the lines, and the many camps, all spoke of war. We journeyed till 2 a.m., when we arrived outside a large station. The number in our van had made sleep out of the question. While it was daylight two friends and

I sat with our legs dangling out of the doorway of the van admiring the scenery, which was not unattractive, and discussing French agriculture.

* * * * *

Two or three of us got out when the train was at a standstill; we put some tea and sugar into our canteen, and went forth to get boiling water. Never did I think I should be engaged at 2.30 a.m. running about a network of rails and trying to get boiling water from a railway-engine. In due course we got the water, and we had an excellent breakfast on the side of the line. It consisted of bully-beef, biscuits, jam, and tea. We were here for some hours, and there were many trains arriving with troops.

I was in the train nearly all day with my companions, and we went through some fairly pretty country, characteristically French, with its wide canals and sentinel poplars, and patches of beautiful woodland and hedgeless fields.

On arriving at our halting-place, Hazebruck, we marched through the pretty town to a soldiers' rest-camp. That night I slept on a stone floor in a building, and, believe me, the difference between a tent on the ground and a stone floor is not so great as between the former and a feather-bed. Anyway, I slept well.

In the morning we marched to our destination, Warren Capell. It was again very hot, and the pack seemed extremely heavy, but the distance was not great. On our arrival we were divided up and sent to several platoons and companies, and here I bade fare-

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well to many of my friends of the past four months. Indeed, only ten of us remained together, but, thank goodness ! I was still with the clay-digger.

We were sent to some farm buildings, and others of our regiment found lodgings in other farm buildings dotted about. At night I slept on the straw in a barn, the very best bed I had had for many a long day.

Here we were fed from field-kitchens, a thing which in my short military experience I had never seen before.

CHAPTER V

WE JOIN OUR BATTALION—THE FIGHTING EIGHTH

It was at Warren Capell I made the acquaintance of the 8th Royal Berks, my battalion for many months to come—not by choice, but by, not the fortune, but the accident of war.

And making the acquaintance of one's battalion meant that one was allocated to a company—mine "B" Company—which in turn meant that we were received by the quartermaster-sergeant of that company, and well do I remember the reception of that quartermaster-sergeant. He called out our ten names in turn, and nine of us shouted in reply, "Here, sir!" "Sir" is the title of all above the rank of sergeant by courtesy, so far as company quartermaster-sergeants and sergeant-majors are concerned, the alternative in their case being "quartermaster" or "major" respectively. One luckless individual of our little group replied "Here"—plain "Here"—to which the quartermaster-sergeant retorted: "'Here' what? Quartermaster-sergeant or sir! A good soldier would say 'sir.'" Etiquette is not only found in Courts.

I disliked that quartermaster-sergeant, but as an instance of first impressions being erroneous I record that I learnt afterwards to like my old first Quartermaster-Sergeant Dodd.

Next the quartermaster-sergeant allocated our little group of ten to different platoons of "B" Company, and so I came to the 6th Platoon. Every member of it, be it recorded, held that the Colonel considered it the best of the battalion. I, knowing my own platoon as a lawyer knows his own case, and knowing it respects his opponents the more, hoped, for the general standard of the Army, that my platoon was the worst rather than the best. In fact, it was an average platoon.

And being introduced to the platoon perforce meant being introduced to its sergeant—Sergeant Brown, an ex-signalman of the London and North-Western Railway—quite a youth, but one of the smartest little men I have met. He had his limitations; he was not great in a crisis, and he was weak as we always said where officers were concerned; but with it all, he was a cheerful, well-meaning little fellow.

Later we ten were inspected by the Captain and received with a few suitable remarks. Our Captain had more the appearance of an unsuccessful poet than an officer of the British Army, but his merits, if few, were great. He was a gentleman—fair, clever, and brave. Does the country ask more?

We had a happy and pleasant time at Warren Capell. We were billeted in the farm buildings of little farms, and the officers were quartered in the homestead. But each of these little farms provided barely sufficient accommodation for a company, tightly as we were packed, and so our battalion was spread over several of the homesteads which, white-walled

and red-roofed, were dotted about the pretty landscape. These days came to an end, and one evening we left our billets. The various companies collected by arrangement, as also did three other battalions—the Black Watch, the Camerons, and the Gloucesters (the four constituted the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, of which fact we were proud)—for the brigade, and I assumed the Division, was on the move.

The first evening we only marched a short distance through peaceful lanes, and then lay down to sleep in a meadow-field. It was quite an experience sleeping out, a crowd in a comparatively small space in a field. I, with others of my age, had been relieved of part of my pack—a very great boon. I was much impressed by the continued peaceful air of this beautiful country; only the military lorries rolling by reminded us of the epic struggle in which we were to play our part.

The dawn broke, the beginning of a perfect June day. On such a morning, to rise with the sun from a couch of grass, to eat cold bacon and drink hot tea, and then to move forward answering “the breezy call of incense-breathing morn,” should have filled us with the primitive joy of the simple life. But we were moving to the lines—lines from which we knew some of us would never return—and we should have been more than human if we had quite escaped the influence of that grey shadow.

Breakfast finished, we started on one of those long, weary marches with which by this time we were too familiar; but the greater part of the journey was covered during the cooler hours, for noon brought us

to the day's destination at Fort Dunkerke. Here we were quartered in buildings which in peace-time had been seaside residences and boarding-houses, I should think. To our great delight we had a bathe in the sea in the afternoon.

At this stage we began to gather and assume that we were going into the lines at Nieuport. I say "assume," for Tommy was seldom or never taken into the confidence of his superiors, and, as I found out afterwards, lieutenants and even Captains knew little more than we did. And perhaps this did not matter, for none of us were required—nor indeed desired—to think.

The following morning we learnt that we were to continue and complete our journey by rail—always a delight to the infantry soldier. It is true that our only accommodation was trucks, but this was quite good enough for us.

A short journey, during every yard of which signs of war grew, brought us within a short distance of Nieuport Bains, from which point we were to enter the lines.

I must say a few words of the billets to which we were taken. They were in a tall, gaunt hotel, actually on the coast-line, and we could throw or even drop a stone on to the sands. But we were forbidden to go on the sands or to attempt to bathe at this spot, for it was under close observation by the enemy. At the time of our arrival light shells were falling within 120 yards of the hotel, and already before we came it had been struck two or three times. As a matter of fact, its

shape and place made it a particularly easy and tempting target, and yet into it three companies of our regiment were crowded, and here they remained for three days and nights. And all the time, 400 yards south-west was unlimited open space where the troops could have been spread and the risk to the lives of masses of men minimized. One heavy shell into this hotel would have reduced our battalion to the point of ineffectiveness. But at this date that would not have mattered, I suppose. The cry "More men!" was still one to which both England and the Colonies would readily respond.

The day of going into the trenches arrived, but the movement had to be effected under cover of the dark, and I will first speak of the incidents of the day.

The recruits, of whom I was one, were given a short lecture by a young officer. I had expected to be shown a map of the trenches, and to hear some explanation of the duties required of us; but the lecture was short and chiefly confined to telling us that going into the trenches did not carry with it a licence to be dirty and slovenly, and that if it were possible to get water we were to shave daily. It reminded me of a tale which an old hand had just told me of an experience the last time he was in the trenches, when one of our platoon officers came round and asked if all men had got their trousers turned four inches below the puttee-strings, because the Brigadier-General, who was expected round, was particular about such details. Finally our officer told us that in these trenches on no account was there to be any cooking or smoke.

I mention this because my next order was to draw the rations for my first day in the trenches, and I was handed two lumps of raw bacon. Some men, however, cooked their bacon in defiance of orders, others ate it raw, while the remainder either threw theirs away or oiled their boots with it.

In after times I had some experience of food in the lines, both as an occupier of trenches and as a storeman or assistant to the quartermaster-sergeant, and therefore charged with getting up food. It was always a risky business, and sometimes the country to be crossed was difficult. Yet the most unlikely things would come up for the troops when in the lines—for example, raw bacon, which under no circumstances could be cooked; or unwieldy quantities of pickles to compensate for a shortage of meat; or bread, which frequently became pulp before the lines were reached, for it could only be got up in sand-bags. By the irony of fate, we always seemed to have few biscuits and a great deal of bread in the lines, and little bread and a lot of biscuits out of the lines. But above all, raisins or dates would arrive when we were in the lines. Think of it—a hunk of dates in a sand-bag to be divided among companies, platoons, and men on arrival! And then raisins, which if ever they got to the lines would work out at a raisin and a half per man. It was, I believe, intended that the raisins should go up with a quantity of flour for puddings, when the troops were in such a position as made pudding-making possible; but unfortunately the flour and raisins used to arrive on different days.

The food was at all times a vexed problem.

England never failed her troops with food, but such strange things were done by the troops when it arrived. Indeed, in no circle of society have I ever seen splendid food so profligately wasted to no purpose whatever.

I may summarize the great defects which I saw in the whole system as follows :

1. Expensive food sent forward where a different and less expensive food would have done better. I refer particularly to bacon.

2. Wholesale pilfering in transit arising entirely through mismanagement. There was no effective supervision, and an elaborate but ineffective system was relied upon instead of responsibility being placed upon men who were in a position either to steal or prevent theft.

3. Good food being handed to incompetent cooks. In my platoon we had a blacksmith for a cook, and an experienced hotel cook as a bomber.

4. Food delivered in ludicrously unsuitable combinations—*e.g.*, golden syrup with very hard biscuits.

The night came for us to enter the trenches. Admittedly the entry would be dangerous, and therefore the precaution was taken of its being made by platoons at a distance of 200 yards apart. I can only speak of my own platoon. To enter the front lines we had to walk some three miles to the neighbourhood of the Yser Canal, and at this point the French, who had previously held the lines, had constructed a tunnel some quarter of a mile long to cover a great danger zone,

from the entry of the tunnel to its terminus on a pontoon bridge over the canal. The most perilous point of all, and a perfect target indeed, was, I understood, at the entrance to the tunnel, where, so I was informed, the Camerons had had casualties the previous evening.

All went well till we got to the entrance to this tunnel, but there were two tunnels, and we went down the wrong one. We discovered our mistake after a time, but instead of retracing our steps, and so retaining the advantage and safety of the tunnel, we came out on to the open to get back to the entrance of the right tunnel. On arrival here—the danger spot—we indulged in the open in a discussion as to which was the right tunnel!

However, in the end we did get into the right tunnel, more by luck than judgment; across the canal, a further three-quarters of a mile; and into the lines.

We were taking over ground new to us from the regiment which had held the lines for the past four days, so that immediately after the change every man holding this sector would be upon unknown ground—a fatal method of change I should have thought, and one I believe not practised by other armies nor by our Army after three years' experience. But at all events it was essential that the relieved party should fully instruct the relieving party. I imagine this was not done. In any case, the impression left upon my mind on this and subsequent occasions was that the party to be relieved were only concerned to see how quickly they could get out of the lines. Be this as it

may, directly we reached the lines, in single file, my sergeant said to me: "Follow this sergeant!" He indicated a sergeant of the regiment that we were relieving. I followed him until we got to a point where a soldier was standing. Of my own party I found that only a lance-corporal had followed me. The sergeant surveyed us. "Oh, here you are!" he said—"only two; I'll go and fetch the others." With his man he hurried away. But we never saw him nor anybody else that night; and we dared not move because we did not know the direction of our own or the enemy's lines.

We were missed, of course, and reported missing; and in the morning we were found.

My dominant feeling that night was that if Jerry came over I could not run away because I did not know the direction of retreat or advance. I only hope some of our fellows were better informed.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE LINES AND OUT AGAIN

TO take up the position which we held in the lines, we had crossed the last half-mile of loose, shifting white sand north of the Yser Canal at Nieuport, and we were at the entrance of the front lines of that part of the British front which held a tract of land not deep and not wide, but which was important, for it was the piece of land which we held north of the canal and adjoining the sea. It was important as a jumping-off ground, if an advance was to be made with a view of turning the enemy's right flank, resting on the coast, with the aid of the Navy. We understood that with the advantage of this piece of land north of the canal, such an attempt was to be made in the near future, and the understanding was confirmed by the steady and continuous concentration of cannon and other appliances and impedimenta which I had witnessed while in support. This in June, 1917; in August, 1918, such concentrations were swift and unexpected, and secured victory by surprise which the enemy aircraft made impossible in the case of slow, sure, and steady concentrations.

I was at the entrance of these front lines with my platoon, awaiting orders as to the exact position we were to take up. We were there on the hushed order "Halt," for we were near the enemy.

I well remember the spot of our halt. On my right there were two graves, each with a simple cross of wood, and on these the moon shone, intensified by the white sand upon which it reflected. Under the cold white glare all issues were concentrated in this simple picture. Here was the tragedy of war epitomized—the wanton greed and cruelty of man, the innocence of man; and the price, the full price, the highest price—the undying sorrow of the bereaved.

During the whole of this spell in the trenches, that section of my platoon to which I was attached was charged with the office of holding a sentry post, and this we did two at a time, for additional security, two hours on and four hours off, the four hours off being spent in a concrete constructed dug-out in the sand, built by the French—an early and perhaps imperfect example of the afterwards famous pill-box of the Germans. I say imperfect, because it had only an interior height of a little over three feet, so that we could scarcely sit up, and also it was built in the loose and moving sands of the dunes, which conveyed a feeling of rolling when shells burst in the vicinity. One was glad to hurry from the sentry post, a distance of some 100 yards, to this haven of security after the vigil. And the entrance was less than three feet by one and a half, and irresistibly the idea of rats and their holes was brought to one's mind. I was struck by the similarity of our lives to those of rats—who, by the way, shared our lot. During the day we ran to our underground dug-outs like rats to their holes, while if we did stir abroad during the day we went as

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if we expected a clout overhead from a human hand. And lastly, at night, we were all astir for rations and the renewal of our damaged defence works. Nor were rats our only living companions, for even on my first night in the trenches I remember the passing fear caused by a rather large cat approaching the spot where I was; and dogs, too, I have seen accepting the life with little concern. But perhaps birds were the least disturbed by what must have been their strangely changed surroundings.

On my mind, what I may call normal things in an abnormal environment produced impressions of a diversity for which it was not always easy to account. I remember, when on sentry at dawn, the soaring and carol of a lark in No Man's Land seemed strangely out of place, a startling reproach to mankind; and yet a later experience of seeing a brace of partridges get up in No Man's Land did not at the moment seem even singular.

I turn to my diary for other reminiscences of my first days in the trenches. I note an incident:

"I was waiting, with a lance-corporal and a private, my turn to go on sentry. We were in the vicinity of our post, sitting in the trench. Suddenly a severe bombardment of guns and trench mortars started, shells falling all around us. We were soon joined by our officer and the sergeant-major, who had been shelled out of their dug-out close by, and one man had been killed and another injured. The bombardment lasted about an hour, and a good many projectiles fell

within 50 yards, some within 10 yards, but none actually in the trench. As each shell came I ducked instinctively, so as to occupy as small a space as possible, and I realized that any moment might be my last; but I seemed at the time to be endowed with a curious calm and self-possession, and I was not afraid. Nor did I feel any sudden reaction. The following day in my immediate position I again encountered a milder and a shorter bombardment, but for twenty-four hours afterwards I was a pitiable coward and wreck. Throughout these hours, whether on or off duty, I simply rubbed clammy hands together. These hours seemed an eternity. On the third day I went on sentry duty at 4 a.m. My companion was a Scot. The poor fellow was wounded the same day. At 4.30 our post became the object of an attack. At times, so close did the projectiles fall that we had to change our immediate positions, and at times to lie down so that we might get into the smallest space possible, and it was then that I thought of pictures that I had seen.

“At one time we were literally covered by soil from an explosion. At 6 a.m., when we went off duty, the bombardment had increased, and the question arose as to whether we should remain in the open where we were, or whether we should make a dash for our dug-out. My will prevailed for the time being over my companion's experience. We stayed out. I was influenced by the feeling that I had no personal confidence in a dug-out, and feared being buried alive. The bombardment increased, and it was frequently necessary for us to change our locality as the direction

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of the falling shells changed, and this movement we usually carried out on our hands and knees, so that we might be as near the bottom of the trench as possible. The bombardment continued till 10.30, and was then increasing, and we were beginning to change our positions more frequently and to take longer distances. At this time my companion and I decided to part company. He went to the dug-out, and I remained out. For two hours more I dodged shells. The one that burst nearest me dislodged about two tons of soil, and this brown avalanche fell only a couple of yards from me, and actually filled my mouth with dirt. At one time the shells were falling on each side of me, and my movements of evasion were thus stopped. Throughout I seemed well and fit, and my brain, worked by a more than normal force, seemed pitted in a great contest with the enemy. At last the bombardment slowed down, and two of my friends came out to me and persuaded me to go into the dug-out, which I did. I made a mistake in ever doing otherwise.

“For the next three days I was again cowardly and fearful, with far less cause. At times it seemed terrible to sit still in a dug-out and hear explosives outside.

“During my stay in the trenches I saw many brave and calm actions, and I was much impressed by a boy of twenty, who was always calm, always out, always moving to his duties, always helping others, and always creating confidence. I have reason to be grateful to him. One night I was sent on an errand to another part of the trenches. I could not find my way

back, and I did not even know whether I was under cover or not. I felt as I imagine a lost child of four feels; I stood still, and after a time I saw a figure, and was just going to him when this boy touched me on the shoulder and said: 'Hullo! kiddie' (I am nearly double his age), 'come with me!' Since I have been in France I have experienced sympathy and kindness from N.C.O.'s and men which has touched me very much."

On sentry-go one night I fell to conversation with my companion in duty. He had had big experience in peace and war as a soldier. He was grimly and calmly ejecting short sentences at me in explanation of what he conceived to be the position. "We shall be lucky to get out of this lot." "I don't like it." "Rum place—water on three sides and the devil in front." "These bombardments mean something." "You bet they know where our bridges are and have got them taped. They can hear the horses come clattering over them every night if we can." "We don't hold the place strongly enough." "Our guns don't seem to support us much." He was about right in his gloomy forebodings, for we had only just been relieved and got away when the Northamptons and the K.R.R.'s fell victims to the position in which they found themselves at the time of the attack. Very few crossed the canal.

On the last night of our stay in these trenches Nature spoke a word in competition with human forces. We had a tremendous thunder-storm. It was the most terrific, in fact, that I ever remember, and incidentally

I got wet to the skin—no uncommon lot with the soldier! But although I was still wet in the morning, it did not seem to make me anything but fit. The storm was rather interesting from this standpoint. A few nights before I had heard a bombardment by the Germans. It was followed two nights later by an English bombardment, which made the German effort seem a bagatelle. And then the storm came, with an even greater crash and roar than the English bombardment. It seemed just to come to prove the invincible superiority of Nature over the attempts of man even in the production of noise. The lightning behind the clouds created a wonderful effect, but although we looked very earnestly for the Angels of Peace seen in England, we had no reward.

And now under cover of darkness we relinquished our posts, marched off in the trenches first in sections and then in platoons, and after the stretch across the sands, the pontoon bridges over the canal, and a maze of trenches, we came to the support or reserve lines on the south of the canal, which we were to hold for a few days.

The most dangerous places I have been in are the support lines—far worse, I think, than the first lines, for the reason that when the contiguous first lines of the contesting forces were in close proximity, as in the case of these particular lines, Fritz did not appear to have sufficient confidence in his artillery to risk a heavy bombardment on to his opponent's lines, with danger of shots going on to his own lines.

At first it seems safe and nice this, by comparison

with the front lines; and after days without you start shaving again and taking your boots off; and then a shell bursts while you are using your razor, and quite close, and then you remember where you are.

From the support lines, again under cover of the dark, we marched back, first through a long winding trench, and then along the road to the reserve lines some miles behind; and what a feeling of relief it gave us *en route* to the reserve lines to hear the lowing of a cow in a field, which told of civil life—for civilians showed great courage in the tenacious way in which they held to their own in the danger zone.

Arrived in the reserve lines, we were in an encampment of tents once again. Bathing in the sea was possible, drill was returned to with all its dull monotony, and military exercises reperformed.

And now one had time to study one's surroundings and one's companions.

And first of the surroundings. We were at Coxyde, on the sea-coast, with a collection of cottages, a few shops, and one hotel and some boarding-houses.

During our fourteen days' stay here we observed an apparently leisurely and unending concentration of guns in the vicinity. Many pieces remained days on the roadside unplaced and out of position. We gathered that an attack was, or had been, in contemplation. Probably "had been," for the loss of the Northamptons and the K.R.R.'s, and, perhaps to the military more important still, the loss of the ground which they held, had changed the plans of our Higher Command.

I have often wondered whether anybody, and if so who, was responsible for the events of this period.

But to turn to my companions as I wrote of them in my diary :

“I am with a very interesting and jolly crowd, coming from all parts of England. It is very educative to mix among these men, whose ideas and characters are as diverse—sometimes as grotesque—as the burrs or drawls of their speech : the accent and the idioms which tell you whether they come from town or country, north or south. One of my constant sources of satisfaction is that my friend the dear old clay-digger is still with us. We generally sleep next to each other. They are all very nice to me, and I believe that ‘Have half of mine!’ is the commonest phrase that I have heard among them. As things go nowadays, when we all pile up experiences at such an intensive rate, many of them are old soldiers, though it is not often that you meet a man who has had more than two years’ foreign service. But it is intensely interesting to talk to them. No doubt their experiences are apt to become a little coloured as they are repeated, especially when there is nobody present to check their facts and figures. But since fighting began in the remotest ages of the world, was there ever a soldier did otherwise?”

And finally I turn to a word about our civilian neighbours :

“The most pathetic sight I have seen is the hasty retreat of the inhabitants from their houses, shops, and

occupations, as the long-range guns are brought into position for the coming trial of strength and for the preliminary trial shots. These people have held most tenaciously, and not without courage, to their homes for nearly three years, and yet now they are in hasty flight. You see old grandfathers carrying little children of two or three years, and you see womenfolk bending under the weight of the few worldly possessions they hold specially dear and can carry away. It is a curious sight, and it would be humorous if it were not pitiful to see the particular articles which different women select for salvage."

CHAPTER VII

SPECIAL TRAINING; MEN AND MATTER

EARLY in the morning our battalion, as part of the brigade and Division, set out for what proved to be a three days' march from Coxyde to an unknown destination for an unknown purpose.

Our first halt at the close of the first day was at Bray-Dunes, and there a barn gave shelter to me and my comrades of my company. The day's march had not been uninteresting. There had been the incident of crossing the frontier of France and Belgium, and throughout the day we were constantly passing battalions of a Division going to take the place we had vacated.

On the morrow our journey in wet and muggy heat was to Dunkirk, and south, beyond to an encampment ground of tents. Again the march was not dull. The passing through Dunkirk itself saved the day from monotony, for as we crossed the bridge and defences of the town we seemed to be linked with the soldiers of past wars. Then, too, we saw the damage sustained by the town from oft-repeated air raids.

The third day solved the mystery of our destination and purpose.

We arrived at Le Clipan. A stretch of land skirting

the coast, the sand and the sand-dunes had been marked off and reserved for our battalion and all other battalions of the 1st Division, and all the component parts of an infantry Division, saving and except non-combatants, so to speak, such as the transport section of each battalion, for this part was not brought within the camp. And it appeared that we were to be wired in, as in fact we were, and sentries were placed round all the boundaries, even the coast-line, so that they would be accosted by any party landing. The orders given were that nobody, not even the Colonel of our regiment, was permitted to enter without producing a pass from the Divisional General; but there were exceptions, and the holders of passes were not all of high rank. For instance, a girl and young man selling papers had passes, and again large numbers of fisher-folk were permitted without passes to traverse the whole length of the camp along the sands. Then, although wired in, we were permitted to go out a short distance from one gate to purchase eatables from civilian hawkers and talk with them. It is true to observe that, going to a number of points without the enclosure, the whole area of the camp and all our doings could be inspected, and there was a circle of cottages giving access to and view of the camp. During part of our internment the secrecy was so great that officers and men were deprived of their leave, but this rule was afterwards relaxed, and then those who returned from leave told us, not what they had told their folk—and it is safe to assume they told a great deal—but what their folk told them of our doings.

Nevertheless, it was a great secret to us; but I ask an average business reader what chances were there of preserving a secret shared by 12,000 men operating and confined in 200 acres of land from a wily enemy who had other means of knowledge besides the certain disclosures of their air service?

However, it was our great secret, and we had a secret within our secret. For within the camp there was an area screened off for days from even us. It was screened and camouflaged even from the sky. What was it? Excitement grew intense. It was called, and referred to as, "Hush-Land." Wild rumours went forth. It was said that some men of the Black Watch—a battalion in our brigade to which rumour was always attributing desperate doings—had tried under cover of darkness to penetrate the guard and its mysteries, and had been arrested and were confined in "Hush-Land" so that they might not escape with the secret.

But in due course the secret was disclosed, for we were taken in companies to the spot, and there was revealed to us an imitation sea-wall made of concrete. The surface was smooth, with a sufficient gradient to make it difficult to climb in army clothes even without pack or impedimenta, and the difficulty was increased by a four-foot perpendicular coping of the wall.

And much of our after training turned upon this piece of staging—a fairly costly affair—for first we learnt to climb unencumbered, then with "battle order dress," and afterwards with light guns and other material to carry into battle.

In connection with our training, we had marked out on the grass near by our encampment the shape and size of a monitor, and it was part of our training for a brigade of men and light guns, with motor-cycles, ambulances, ammunition carriers, and even tanks, to take up our allotted position, and at a given signal to rush off in order up a hill as up a sea-wall, and fall into battle array.

This work afforded substantial confirmation of the idea which was gaining ground that it was intended to use us to make a landing from the sea behind the German lines.

The idea may have been good or bad ; but if good, it still had one fatal defect. That was that such preparations in modern warfare, with modern means of knowledge open to the enemy, made surprise, the essential factor of success in modern as well as ancient warfare, impossible.

I often thought in France that had England had fewer men to drain upon, and smaller financial resources behind her, her success would have been greater. It always seemed to me that in place of great generalship and staff organization and the rapid execution of schemes, we felt bound to use the ponderous forces which we had at our command. The concentration of these forces necessarily took time, and, moreover, and perhaps more important too, added to the difficulty of mobility and rapidity in following up an initial success. The enemy invariably took advantage of our protracted preparations on the one hand, and our slowness in following up advantages on

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the other, by concentration, and thereby stultified our great forces.

It may be said in reply that I as a private was scarcely in a position to form an opinion either of the movements of large forces or the difficulties with which the Generals had to cope. True; but it was noticeable to a private that our methods in the summer of 1918 differed as much from those of 1917 as the results did. I give an instance. Compare the rapid concentration of troops before Albert on August 8 with our slow, heavy, and costly, and perhaps doubtful, proceedings at Passchendael in 1917.

To return to our training. Our remaining time was taken up with exercise over a specially constructed obstacle-race course, sham fighting over the dunes, and the usual training of soldiers.

One day actual monitors arrived off the dunes, and then indeed we thought after two months that the time was approaching for our great attack. But that was not so. A few of us, of whom I was one, were selected to go on board the monitors and inspect them, and the preparations made for us; and then, after an exchange of visits and courtesies, anchor was weighed and the monitors left us. After a further space of time we left Le Clipan to go to the graves of Passchendael.

Till I am enlightened I shall always wonder whether the true secret was not that we had no secret, and hoped solely to keep the Germans concentrated for an attack which was never to be achieved. In any case, the occupation of the 1st English Division for three months for this purpose was costly.

Our stay at Le Clipan was not without its joys. It was here that we got to know our officers and companions better. It was here that a new Colonel took over our battalion—Colonel Dewing. How great he was ! In age he was ten years my junior, and he was very fine in physique. He addressed us when he arrived, and from that moment he had won our affection. His whole attitude was that of calling for and not demanding comradeship. He won what he asked, and in return he made it his constant duty to give all the men, not what they were barely entitled to, but what he could manage to give to them, whether more or less.

Many times did I see him walking round our camp when food was being dished out, no cap on, a pipe in his mouth, coat unbuttoned and hands in his pockets—doing everything that an officer should not do. And thus he would join a group waiting for dinner. Certainly he did not lose respect. At the first sign of him every man would spring to attention, and he would smile at us and say, "What's the dinner like, boys?" and on occasions I have heard him say: "Rotten ! I wish we could get you something better."

Two things he made clear from the outset: (1) a hatred of petty offences being brought to his notice, and (2) a determination never to permit a man in the regiment to suffer No. 1 Field Punishment.

Curiously enough both officers and men were fond of him, and in my judgment the fighting *moral* of the battalion vastly improved under him.

He was killed while being carried, wounded, from the fighting-line by his servant.

I found that young officers, taken on the whole, showed sterling qualities. Notwithstanding the varied occupations and classes from which they were drawn, they exhibited not only a courage which we expected of them, but a leadership, an adaptability, and soldierly qualities which in my opinion entitled them to a greater share as a recruiting fund in the future permanent Army than has been accorded or made possible for them; and I venture to add that this justice might have been rendered them with great advantage to the Army both during and after the war.

But the young officers—and I believe they caught it from their superiors—had one universal trait, which was at once magnificent and fatal: a blind belief at all times that they had the enemy at their mercy. Evidence to the contrary seemed to have no effect, and no reverse seemed to cast doubt upon their sanguine, amazing confidence.

There came a time, of course, when the enemy was broken, and the road to victory clear; but there was also a time when a due appreciation of formidable difficulties would have been more beneficial than a blind and premature optimism.

For my impressions of the men I refer to my diary, and give incidents of my association with them during our stay at Le Clipan:

“Life is very interesting out here, and on the whole I do not find it hard or rough; but my past life makes

it impossible for me to carry weights or do manual work with the same ease as most of the other fellows. At the same time, I have been greatly surprised at what I have been able to do. Others are probably more surprised at what I cannot do. The fellows are always very good to me. They generally pass on to me things which I can do, as I think they know I am willing to do what I can, but if there is a big weight to carry and it is given to me, and another fellow has a lighter job, he always swops jobs with me.

"We all keep fit and well and feel quite comfortable. For the last two months I have sat nowhere but on the ground, and I shall always hereafter be content to enjoy a good meal lying on the floor, provided always there is some cover overhead. In any case, we all remain quite cheerful. Daily we rush to the distribution of our rations. Often enough it happens that we are in a state of sheer food bankruptcy, for whenever our daily rations are served out we demolish them even before the allotted twenty-four hours begin.

"Even the pangs of hunger do not shake our cheerfulness, though it must not be supposed that we do not grouse and grumble. As a matter of fact, the British soldier always does that. For instance, we march twelve or fifteen miles a day, and grumble deeply as folk over-driven. Then we go into a rest-camp, do nothing, get idle, and grumble because once in a way we have to spread out our things for an inspection.

"Yet while he grumbles the British soldier has a wonderful capacity for making the best of things, no matter how difficult and trying they may be. Perhaps

this is the best example of which I can think. When the weather is bad—and we have had a great deal of bad weather of late—we have to play cards to while away the time, and, be it confessed, we like to play for money. But—another little confession—money runs short soon after pay-day, so then we gamble for cigarettes. Often they run short, too, and, with undiminished cheerfulness, we play a highly proper and decorous game for love!

“Some men are of course better than others in the great art—always valuable in life, and of supreme value to the soldier—of making the best of it. Twice I have been on duty with a guard of six or eight men away from the main body in an outlying position, and under such circumstances you are dependent on your own skill and energy in getting things cooked, water boiled, and so forth. On both occasions I have been associated with a fellow named Poynter, who at once became the life and soul of the party, whether in finding wood, preparing a meal, cooking and serving it, or making things generally as favourable as possible. On the second occasion, when Poynter was actually on duty, three or four of us set out in the grey morning for the purpose of getting wood for our fire. We laboured for some time with the least possible success, and we began to get a bit gloomy in the face of futility. But I had faith in Poynter. ‘Let us wait till he comes,’ I told the others. And sure enough within a few minutes of his arrival we were provided with all essentials. Perhaps it would not be well to inquire too closely how he succeeded where all the rest of us

had failed, but he did succeed. At all events, he does not steal, for that is a word unknown to the British soldier. If we have lost anything, or for some other reason want anything badly, we may go out early or late to 'win' what is wanted, but steal never."

* * * * *

"To-day I have been cooking for a party on guard away from our main party. For breakfast I served bacon—they tell me mounting prices are banishing bacon from breakfast-tables at home—and fried bread. For dinner mutton-chops were the *pièce de résistance*; but stew, with vegetables, was an alternative, or a 'follow-on.' I served both tea and coffee, and I can assure you that everything gave complete satisfaction. Ah! whenever I hear again at home of a cook complaining about a cooking-range, I shall send her to cook the meals on the lawn in a raging, tearing thunderstorm."

* * * * *

"We are held up—not by the enemy, but by the weather. There have been torrential rains, and with them a hurricane wind. We have been exposed to the full fury of its buffetings, for we are in a tent, and during the last forty-eight hours we have had a tremendously exciting and constantly renewed struggle to keep our frail canvas walls about us. Night and day we have had to struggle—and vainly—to keep a dry skin. Sometimes the water has come through at the top, like a shower-bath; sometimes forced itself in at the bottom in an expanding flood; and finally the whole structure was threatened with collapse. Then

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you might see half our great crowd of residents holding on inside while the others dashed out and put things right for the moment. But to-night we are all very happy, with the fall of the wind, and we have celebrated the event with a four-course dinner and plenty of beer.

“But the episodes draw to a close—we leave our camp of three months and set out on the long and weary daily march which leads to Passchendael.”

CHAPTER VIII

MARCHES—AND IN PARTICULAR THE MARCH TO PASSCHENDAEL

WHILE in France I did my fair share of marching with full pack from one point to another. Sometimes the march was day by day, and sometimes with rather longer breaks. We generally slept *en route* in barns or the outhouses of farm buildings, and sometimes we had good, clean straw to lie down upon, and at other times we were without it.

The march from Le Clipan to Passchendael did not materially differ from other marches.

I confess that I did not find a change that involved long route marches any too pleasing, particularly since it came after a long spell of comparative rest. The infantry-man's pack is always a burden, and with winter clothing and other things the weight habitually carried had increased, and the roads, too, never too good, had not been improved by the autumn rains. Nobody, I think, who has not experienced it can fully realize the pain of exhaustion when a journey is finished, sometimes with blistered feet, shoulders skinned by straps, an aching back—yes, and an aching heart. There are some men, of course, who from their constitutional strength or their training stand such journeys better than others, but for myself I confess that there have been journeys when I have

found it difficult to suppress a sob, and at the end of which I have had to rely on the kindly act of another to remove my pack while I lay exhausted on the ground.

The journey, though arduous, is often interesting. It may appeal from the standpoint of landscape scenery from the towns and villages traversed, but what is often even more interesting than the topography is the traffic one meets on the road. This is particularly so on the occasion such as I speak of, when we were marching towards one of the famous battlefields of the world. Imagine what it means to keep a large body of men supplied with the necessities of life; imagine, further, the ammunition needed for an army in the present war; imagine yet again the inevitable wastage of all kinds of material resources always in progress, and the repairing and replenishing which must take place—imagine these things, and you will have some faint idea what a road is like which serves as one of the great supply arteries in a main theatre of war. The vehicles most in use are the usual motor-lorries and horse-waggons and limbers, converted buses, and sometimes even a railroad constructed parallel to the road to cope with the vast transport work required. Sometimes in the road one sees an unbroken string of traffic, never ending and never pausing so far as your observation can follow it. Often, lying in billets just off a main road, one hears the dull, continuous roar of this sea of traffic, which rarely dies down and never wholly ceases.

The halts *en route* are worthy of a word of descrip-

tion. You may, for instance, find yourself billeted in farm buildings miles from any other human habitation. Then, indeed, it needs all your philosophy and internal resources to prevent your having a miserable evening, particularly if, in these grey days of early winter, you are in a cold, wet outbuilding and the candle stock is exhausted. But if you are a philosopher you may perhaps get a little consolation from the thought that under such circumstances, when there is no place to spend anything, money is valueless, and the ideal of perfect equality is reached.

Again, you may be billeted near an *estaminet*, or there may be several, where you buy the mild beer and sour wine of the country. The average British soldier has hardly yet accustomed his palate to these beverages; but in after years he will often think with gratitude of even the poorest *estaminet*, for here one can get light and warmth, and sometimes the *estaminet* provides amusement, too. One such place I visited was in a neighbourhood where two Divisions were billeted. And in addition to English, Welsh, Irish, and Scotch troops in the district, there were Colonial, Belgian, and French soldiers. The largest room in the *estaminet* was constantly packed with military humanity. Never have I seen such a gathering, never heard such a babel of sounds, never seen such a striking illustration of fraternity at its best. In one corner a soldier played a violin with great skill and feeling; in another a concertina had its special audience; mouth-organs asserted themselves; there were songs, accompanied and unaccompanied; but all these sounds

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were localized by the general din of chatter with which the whole room buzzed and boomed.

Lastly, you may find yourself billeted in a town. Then we Tommies have our little hour of crowded life. On my first experience of this kind I rushed with others to the overthronged town, and there made a hearty meal of fish and chips. And many times after I longed for another such meal: and yet how many times have I passed a shop or stall in old England, where such dainties were to be bought for a trifling payment, and never dreamed that they could hold so much pleasure for me!

And with such incidents we covered the road from Le Clipan to Passchendael. The first day brought us near to Watton, where farm buildings were our billets; and the next day to other farm buildings near Arneke, and here we had a halt of several days.

And then on to Wormhoudt, on the outskirts of where we had a longer stay in the early autumn, housed in farm buildings away from roads, and with no evidence of war saving that of our own presence in the peaceful surroundings.

Here during our stay of some fourteen days we practised the arts of war and indulged in football, and, these daily tasks accomplished, we used to repair in little batches of comradeship to Wormhoudt in the evening. Sometimes the revels of the evening would be eggs and chips, and sometimes the almost as harmless indulgence in French beer in an *estaminet*.

And the evenings of revelling seemed far distant from the great battle in which we were soon to play a

hand. But I remember a passing cloud. One night we were in an *estaminet* which was in charge of one of that almost common type of capable business-girl in which the French race appears to abound. She told us that she had been serving men going to and returning from this sector of the line, and she had been saddened by the failure of so many fine Englishmen to make the return journey to her house of business.

The days passed, and we left behind us the happy times and scenes of Wormhoudt, and marched into a camp of tents called "School Camp," not far from Proven.

It was a great change, for we had left behind us all signs of civilization and peace, and had come to the conclusive evidence of war.

Here the guns roared ceaselessly; here we witnessed many an air fight; and through all continued the drone of traffic from and to the lines.

And in our camp, a sea of mud in which tents stood, there were few marks of geography from which to take our bearings—in fact, only a light railway running east and west for ammunition intersecting the sea of mud.

The soil in each tent had been removed to a depth of from one to three feet, and banked up outside, not only to give protection in the event of bombing and shelling, but in the attempt to remove the mud and secure a dry bed upon which to lie. It seems strange to dig down into the earth as a means of avoiding dampness.

Here the conditions were such as to remove—to our great joy—any chance of repeating drills and parades. In this sea of mud to splash about carrying the necessities of food for meals was about the only duty of which the conditions permitted.

We remained in this camp for three days, and at sunset we floundered out of the mud, and in platoons advanced to occupy the support lines near St. Julien, preparatory to going into the front lines at Passchendael.

Our actual locality was Irish Farm, a place which will be remembered by many soldiers, for it was what was termed a "warm corner." There was a reason for this; it was an island, so to speak, formed by roads, railroads, and batteries of guns, and as a soldier who knew the spot told me (and it was a good description): "You see, in the way of bombs and shells you get all that are intended for you, and all that miss the places for which they are intended." It seemed to me a strange place at which to station troops.

We entered our camp, again of tents, under the cover of the dusk, and overnight we had little chance of forming an opinion of our camp or its surroundings; but we realized that we were in tents with a soft flooring of four inches of mud, and an early-morning experience brought to our notice that tents, and particularly those which had not been dug out for protection against bombs, were not suitable for this spot, although the use of them at this date seemed to show that the discovery had not been made before.

Early in the morning following our arrival we had a

visit from Jerry in an aeroplane. He dived unnoticed through the mist and dropped three bombs on our encampment, with serious results.

This led to the day being occupied in digging out and sand-bagging the tents, and finding dug-outs in place of tents, and the placing in position of Lewis guns to augment the air defence.

It was a little late to take these precautions, for the camp had been in the danger zone for some weeks, and it must be confessed that the incident had its disturbing influence. On the second raid of the day sixty-four Lewis guns fired madly at an aeroplane which never came within five miles of range, while the Tommies, selecting their own dug-out, did not get orders and were late on parade. Finally, the day's rations "got lost." As our Captain tartly put it to us : "Jerry did not bomb you to kill you, but to demoralize you. You are late on parade and you have lost your rations. He seems to have done it."

CHAPTER IX

PASSCHENDAEL

NOW a few words of the experience of being "in support" on an active battle-front. You may be miles from the actual front line, but you will be near enough to be with your own guns before you and behind you, according to their range and weight, and, too, you will be close enough, rest assured, to be liable to the constant attack of the enemy by guns and by aircraft. And so we lived for some days and nights—at first alarmed by the crack of our own guns, fore and aft, and at last little disturbed by the activity of enemy attack. At times there would be lulls for short or long periods, and then a shell would fall near by and remind us that we were in support; or, again, the crack of our anti-aircraft guns, or the rattle of our machine-guns, would tell us that enemy aircraft were approaching either to attack or to spy. Our dwellings were mainly dug-outs, holding from two to twenty. To these we used to rush if things seemed dangerous, and in these we slept, knowing that they could not protect us in the event of a direct hit, and wondering how close a shell or bomb would have to fall to injure us.

What a life we led in that rough dug-out! Its dreariness and melancholy were matched by its sur-

roundings. Imagine a treeless, houseless, hedgeless tract of mud and water, whose surface of dull brown and dirty grey is pitted with countless gaping shell and bomb holes, while across it run newly made railway-tracks and roads—already broken by shell-fire—and above all, foot-tracks made of trench or duck boards.

One day while in support I found myself one of a party of a dozen, a rifle covering party to a carrying party, with orders to go from support up to the front line and then return. We started early in the afternoon upon a journey which it would take us until eight or nine at night to perform. It was a bright afternoon typical of golden autumn, and one can imagine how delightful a long tramp would have been if one had under one's feet the springy turf of a Berkshire down. But instead of that we had to journey through an illimitable sea of sticky and oozing mud, only varied by water-filled shell-holes and the floating waste of the battlefield. And we had to perform our journey entirely on duck or trench roads—indeed, it is difficult to conceive how we could otherwise have accomplished it.

At the time of the journey of which I speak, the British had opened up a fierce bombardment, and at first I was dazed by the blinding flashes and reverberating cracks that assaulted eye and ear as we picked our board-way between our own guns, locked almost wheel to wheel and nose to tail. But after a time I gained some confidence, and was able to survey my surroundings as I marched. They were horrible

surroundings—the flotsam and jetsam of the last battle, the bodies of friend or enemy, irrecoverable in that wide morass; and then, as you walked by some water-filled shell-hole, a drowned horse with wide-open eyes seemed to look up and rebuke humanity. Ever and anon as we pursued our track across that weary waste we saw other parties tracking their way through the wilderness to meet us. Among them was a train of stretcher-bearers, for whom we selected a piece of ground drier than the other pieces, and stepped off our boards to give them passage.

There were some points of interest in that Slough of Despond. We passed our own no longer used trenches, and we passed trenches from which our troops had expelled the enemy. We examined them carefully, noted the labour and material which had gone to their making, and knew that the enemy never intended or expected to leave them. And now I have spoken of all I saw in that dreary journey over that dismal battlefield—of all but three broken and blackened trees which stood solitary wrecks in a waste that stretched as far as the eye could carry. But I must add this. The journey that I have described into advanced and dangerous positions was useless. Someone had blundered, and we had run the gauntlet only to be sent back directly we got to our destination. Fortunately no casualties were incurred in this outing, the object of which I never learned.

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I want to say a word about one's feelings on the battle eve, if indeed there can be said to be an "eve"

of a modern battle, for nobody knows when such a battle begins or when it ends. In the warfare of to-day conflict in a certain section increases in fury, and at some stage of that fury a battle has begun. At some future time that fury dies down, and the battle has ended. No man fights through that battle. A battle is a great operation of machinery, and certain parts of that machinery have to be renewed from time to time. Infantry is part of that great machinery, and so it happens that regiment replaces regiment from time to time; hence the individual infantryman's battle eve may be the middle or the closing phase of the battle.

I well remember—indeed, I could not forget if I tried—my battle eve. I lay in a small dug-out in support—a dug-out into which we pressed three. I lay there and chattered of the future with my two friends. Little did I think that in thirty-six hours I should be the sole survivor of that little group, but so it was. The veil that hides to-morrow is never more merciful than to us soldiers, living always on the brink of a possible tragedy.

And now the day comes when we, as the spare part of a machine, go to the front—not to trenches, but to ground in the course of conquest and consolidation, to replace another regiment, another spare part, who have won or held the ground, or both. We start the track in daylight, and we finish in silence near our enemy by night. We take up our position in the forefront of that waste track in little groups secreted in shell-holes drier than other shell-holes. Our order is to hold the ground we occupy, and later, at a given

time, to advance our holding whether the advance is disputed or not, and then again to hold the advanced positions.

We take up our particular positions. There is no need to tell the sentry of our tiny post to keep a good lookout. We shall know that our lives may depend upon that, and we know that the sentry realizes that when we hear his sharp challenge to any moving object. Once the reply sought does not come quickly, the sentry shouts, "Speak!" and up we jump, rifle in hand and aimed, as our sergeant hisses, "Perhaps he doesn't know the language and can't." But all goes well to dawn, when the enemy opens a bombardment upon our ground. He knows we are there, but not exactly where. He is searching the ground for us with remorseless pertinacity. The position is horrible. The shells fall left, fall right, fore and aft. There is no need to ask, "Where did that go?" for they all go close. One shell kills four by our side, and knocks in our wall of mud. First we pray for life, and then, overstrained and exhausted, we pray for death; and then, after an hour and a half—as we ordinarily measure time, but, in intensity of emotional experience, a lifetime—the bombardment lifts and moves.

The day wears on without further event, a fog settles down, and now we wait for the next phase—the advance. At last the hour, the minute, the second comes. It is dark and foggy, and we welcome both the darkness and the fog, for we know where we are going and the order in which we are going, and neither darkness nor fog can alter that knowledge, although

we are in a sea of mud. We advance, watchful and in silence. We near and, but for a little, gain our positions, and then we are in touch—in close touch—with the enemy. The enemy thus alarmed send up their S.O.S. signal to their artillery; they repeat and repeat again the signal of distress, but before their artillery can get into action our artillery has started, for we, seeing the enemy's signal, send out the S.O.S. too. But we do not need to repeat it, for every artilleryman is ready and waiting, and our message has scarcely arisen above the height of man when it is answered by one great roar, not of one gun, not of many guns, but of every gun which is detailed to come into action that night, and every gun speaks at once. Then the German artillery opens, and thus begins the duel which is to last fifteen hours.

During that fifteen hours we completed and consolidated our advance, and settled down to wait until our relief came in the evening—till the new spare parts of the great machine arrived to carry on where we left off.

At last that death-dealing duel over us and around us ended. It was followed by a great and welcome calm, in which we watched against attack while we waited for relief, counting the minutes that passed so slowly but still passed.

Night came, and with the darkness the approach of the men of another regiment who were to relieve us, and so enable us to get back out of the fighting line to a camp in the support lines. That was a position which we knew from experience would be shelled by

the enemy, but still it would offer comparative rest from the forward lines with all their attendant horrors. At last, I say, we were relieved, and then we started a journey in the dark which was destined to occupy a whole night and to be a very painful ordeal. The enemy, as if enraged at the escape of his prey, shelled us fiercely as we left and as we went.

Our journey was first a struggle through an area of mud, made dangerous by deep, water-filled shell-holes. Then we traversed miles of trench or duck boards, laid like a continuous bridge over shell-holes and bottomless mud; next we struck a footpath, and finally a road.

We had not struggled more than a few yards when I discovered that the long standing and sitting in clay mud up to and above the knees had partially deprived me of the control of my legs. I speak of myself because I know of myself, but in all that I say my case and condition did not differ materially from the case and condition of others. A few yards farther and I had fallen into a shell-crater, and my right arm was buried in clinging mud right up to the shoulder, so that I was powerless to help myself. From this unpleasant position I was rescued by the muscular strength of the clay-digger. I got righted just in time to see one of my friends disappear in a water-filled shell-hole, but he, too, was rescued.

At last, exhausted by this time from struggling step by step as the treacherous mud held us back, we gained the friendly boards. But the boards did not give us the relief expected, for they were uneven,

broken by shell-fire, and in places missing, and the darkness helped to confuse and baffle us. Mile after mile we struggled on, sometimes slipping into infusing mud three feet deep, at other times falling headlong into cold, slimy pools of mud and water.

At length, with a great weight of mud clinging about me, and a feeling of exhaustion heavy upon me, I begged to be allowed to lie where I was while the platoon went ahead. But the platoon would not abandon a comrade in distress. And so I made one effort more, and, mud-plastered, sweating from every pore, encouraged by kindly words, helped by friendly arms, I struggled to the road at last. And there for a time we lay, weak men and strong alike, in the mud of the road, exhausted. After a while we staggered to our feet, and continued our journey until we came to a spot where men made soup under shell-fire to feed exhausted troops. I was too worn to get the soup for myself, but a young friend who had kept steadfastly with me through all these miles, always uttering words of encouragement, got me some, and this meant so much.

At last we started on our journey again, but many of us had become fagged out beyond the restoring power of soup, and the sergeant called out for volunteers to carry the rifles and equipment of men who could no longer carry them for themselves. Some worn men staggered forward to bear the burdens of men still more worn. Eventually we reached the road to our camp, and here we anxiously awaited the reserve, and non-combatants, cooks, and others, who had not

been into the line. Plenty of help was soon forthcoming. I was supported by strong arms on both sides, and so, singly or in little groups of two or three, we staggered and struggled into the camp. When we got under its lights what a forlorn spectacle we presented ! Our clothes were weighed down and caked by the adhesive, slimy mud, and gaped in rents where the mud's sheer weight had pulled open seams. Prompt and kindly hands fed me with what I needed so much, and then my wet clothes were pulled off and I was wrapped in blankets and slept.

On the morrow a message of thanks and appreciation was brought from our Divisional General, followed by a personal visit from our Brigadier; for we had won ground; but more than that, we had held our positions, receiving all the enemy could give us without the power of defence.

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From my diary :

“It may be interesting to describe the experience of lying in a shell-hole, eight or ten of us, in an advanced position, where one of the dangers to be thought of was the prying eyes of the enemy's aeroplanes. The chance of the enemy spotting us in our position is increased or decreased according to whether the airman is flying high or low, while in either case the colour of our uniform and equipment, surmounted by helmets covered by sand-bags, reduces the chances of being spotted to a minimum, always provided we keep perfectly still while the airman is

passing. Above all, we must resist the temptation of looking up, for an upturned human face, so we are taught, is very noticeable to an observer in the skies. Now if you are spotted, one of three things is likely to result. The airman may be at the right distance and turn his machine-gun upon you, or he may circle round and then drop bombs upon you, or he may drop from his machine little fairy lights of green and orange. We know what the last means—a signal to artillery, and in a very short time shells will come crashing about the position. And so it comes to pass that while one is in such a situation as I have described the following conversation will take place—a conversation almost monosyllabic: low, intense words that pass from mouth to ear:

“‘Jerry up!’ ‘Where?’ ‘At the back.’ ‘Is it a Jerry?’ ‘There are two of ’em.’ ‘Ours, aren’t they?’ ‘No, by God—it’s Jerry! Keep your heads down!’

“And there we sit, still, face looking to the ground, till the sound of the humming engines has drawn close and then died away again.”

I have been speaking in this chapter of Passchendael, the ridge from which the newspapers told us we could see all the movements of the enemy, and command the coast, which the enemy in consequence would be compelled to evacuate. But Passchendael, if it was a ridge at all, was not the highest in the neighbourhood, and in prosaic fact it was a morass, commanding nothing, and only tenable when the summer made it possible for the enemy to advance. In this

position we were surrounded by guns to such an extent that one of our N.C.O.'s left a shell-hole to report that our guns were firing "short"—only to be told that it was an enemy gun at our back.

I have often wondered how many lives were lost and spirits broken by holding the Passchendael ridge and the Ypres salient. I have often thought that a great General, having won the ground, would have braved the clamour of a section of the English Press, and have given it up again.

* * * *

And now to speak in the following extracts from my diary of a light and more cheerful side of the soldier's life in the field :

"I have had the pleasant interlude of a steam bath after being submerged in mud for a spell. It was indeed a treat, and while I bathed my clothes were put to bake. But I found that other clothes had been substituted for mine when I wanted to reclaim them—which taught me what I had least expected, that somebody in the regiment was in an even more filthy and dilapidated condition than I. But every cloud has its silver lining, for a little later I met my quartermaster, a real good sort, who, after surveying me, said that until I had had a new rig-out from head to foot he would not like to see me on many parades. He did not forget me, for as consignments of clothing came forward I was able to put on first one article and then another, till I began to look quite respectable again."

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"We returned to rest in the vicinity of a town, and discovered a Church Army Hut, one of the institutions which, with the Y.M.C.A., have done so much—how much only a Tommy can say; and we found, too, a cinema, and a place where we could get steak, roast potatoes, and green peas. Think of it—tea, the theatre, and then dinner!"

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"I have been very interested in my relations with my companions during the past months, as exemplified by their method of addressing me. It began with Mr. —, then it was — without any prefix, and now my Christian name with the prefix 'old.' Nor could it be otherwise, for there is an unbreakable bond of friendship between my companions and me, strengthened by recent events, and these distinctions are graded by a truer test than the social and family circumstances which shape them at home."

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"I often wonder how those of us fortunate enough to return to civil life will accept its conditions. I feel that the older among us will return to the habits which, built up by years, cannot be broken by the conditions and adventures of months. But what of the younger ones? I wonder how they will view our artificial social life after serving an apprenticeship to rough-and-ready reality?"

CHAPTER X

ON FATIGUE PARTIES

AFTER our Passchendael experience we went to Chauny Camp, a camp of the hutment description designed by and formerly occupied by the French; and here and at Woesten we were in the reserve, and were stationed for some months alternating with the occupation spells of the support lines on the Yser Canal, and the occupation of the front lines in different sectors north and south of Houlthurst Forest.

There are two outstanding memories in my mind relative to this locality. The first is the matter of fatigue parties, a common occupation of the infantry soldier; and the second the method of warfare conducted from reinforced concrete constructions which at one time played so large a part through the Press in the minds of the public under the slang term of "pill-boxes."

I propose in this and a succeeding chapter to speak of fatigue parties and pill-boxes.

Fatigue parties are part of a soldier's life while his regiment is lying in support to the front lines. During this period Tommy is usually idle in the daytime, but when night falls the fatigue parties start out. Their duties fall under one of three heads: first, getting rations up to the front line; second, getting ammuni-

tion and defence material, such as barbed wire, there; third, effecting repairs to or improving or increasing the defences of the front line.

Whatever may be the occasion, all our desire is to get the job done in quietude, and while Jerry is not shelling the lines. But Jerry generally knows the routes up to the lines, and knows that during the night these routes will be used, and for the benefit of fatigue parties he attacks the routes and their approaches with shrapnel.

The work is often made difficult by the swampy character of the ground underfoot—though here frost has sometimes helped—and it is often also made dangerous by the bright, revealing moon overhead. In this, as in other things, experience hardens one. On the first occasions, when you know that you are working within perhaps a few hundred yards of the enemy's lines and exposed to his view, you are apprehensive. But it is curious how even those of us not overdone with nerve get used to these perils, and add to them by talking—for Tommy is an inveterate gossip—though the things one says might just as well be said on the morrow.

I speak of fatigue parties here because it was in the vicinity of Houlthurst Forest that I enjoyed a superabundance of fatigue parties. But it is convenient to add, by way of classification, to experiences of fatigue parties gained in this locality, the experiences of other localities. My initiation into and first experiences of the art of fatigue parties were at the end of June, 1917, at Nieuport, immediately after we had been relieved in

the front lines north of the Canal, and gone back to the support lines to the south. The party was about one hundred strong, in charge of two officers, and our journey was about two and a half miles on the south side of the Canal. On arriving at the Canal, we went down a road parallel to it to a dump of the Royal Engineers. There we received various loads to take up to the lines. My share was eight iron stakes of about four feet used for wiring. After we had taken over our loads we waited for some forty minutes in the road for a reason which I never knew—but I was painfully aware that this particular road throughout the day had been severely shelled, and a renewal might be expected at any moment. After this unexplained delay, we were to cross one of the bridges over the Canal, a favourite and constant target for Jerry—and, indeed, his practice on it culminated in the bridge being destroyed and the Northamptons and K.R.R.'s being cut off a few days later, events to which I refer in another chapter. This bridge was the spot selected for a further apparently unnecessary delay of fifteen minutes. However, we got over the bridge of peril and continued our march—a very difficult one to me with my load and with loose sand underfoot.

About a mile's progress took us to the lines, where we divided up. My small party was put into a trench, and there we sat for some three hours, during which we had about twenty minutes of shell-fire uncomfortably close. Just before dawn one of our officers came and fetched us. The several parties joined up together, and we returned home without our loads.

I must tell you what became of my load. I had not been with my battalion long and I did not know the fellows very well, but a young lance-corporal seemed to be in charge of my party, so after I had sat in the trench for about an hour I said to him: "What have I got to do with these things?" He replied: "Well, chum, if I were you I should bury them in the sand, or else very likely you will be made to carry 'em back where you got 'em from. I am going to bury mine." And so we solemnly carried out this burial of our burdens.

I felt very bitter all the way home when I thought of the struggle I had had to get up with my load, and the risk I had been uselessly running. But the incident was not without its lesson, for after that I seldom or never arrived at the end of a journey with the load I was given to start with. At first I felt that it was necessary to make excuses for my slackness, arguing that it was no good breaking my spirit and health to no purpose; but after a time the proceeding became mere routine, and my conscience required no salve.

Another fatigue which I well remember was a day fatigue while we were in reserve at Woesten. We paraded one hundred strong under the orders of two officers at 4 a.m. on a bitter morning. The order had been circulated at about 10 o'clock the previous night. The order of parade was "steel helmets and gas respirators," and each man a pick or shovel. We assumed that we were going towards the lines to justify the order, but in fact we put on this gear, which always added to our discomfort in working, merely

to march directly away from the firing-line, and we were not in the danger zone when we started. On arrival at our destination we found that the work required of us was to dig soil from a pasture field (and the damage involved made our task savour more of mischief than military achievement), and remove it some two hundred and fifty yards to bank it round a building as a protection from bomb raids. There was no better reason for protecting this particular stable seven miles from the lines than for protecting the remaining two hundred unprotected buildings in the district.

It will be appreciated that to make our work effective it was necessary to have some conveyance for the soil between the two objective points. This had been foreseen, and four wheel-barrows (but one had a broken wheel) had been provided. Everyone with normal intelligence will understand that the number of wheel-barrows limited the work to nine men, and yet a hundred had come. In fact, one hundred weary, hungry men returned home ten hours later without having accomplished the work of nine men; but the mischief and damage of one hundred and nine men had been done. And in this wise we were daily discouraged and disheartened.

And yet another fatigue is green in my memory. It was an operation in the vicinity of Houlthurst Forest. Between sixty and eighty of us set out from the support lines on a bright, a very bright, a dangerously bright, moonlight night. At the start we did not know—and here I speak of N.C.O.'s as well as men—

either our destination or the operation we were to perform, and so we did not take the essential tools for the job. In due course we learned that we were required to place three hundred yards of concertina wire immediately in front of our front lines, as we were informed, and believed, within four hundred yards of the enemy. This last information cannot have been correct, or we must inevitably have been wiped out that night, unless indeed Jerry was overcome with amusement at our stupidity.

We arrived at our objective only to realize that we could not find the dump from which we were to get the material for the job. Thereupon a chatter as from a rabble started. We ran disputing and swearing first in this direction and then in that, sometimes together and sometimes in parties, always striving to find the dump. And during the noise and confusion an officer of the regiment in the lines came up and conducted us to the dump. Now, to set concertina wire it is essential to have iron stakes of four feet or more in length; but the only stakes on the dump were three-foot ones. Whereupon a fierce argument ensued between our officers and the officer of the regiment in the line whether concertina wire must be set with four-foot stakes. The point was not really a doubtful one, but the fierceness of the argument lacked nothing on that account. We men loyally supported our officers and won the argument by weight of numbers.

Then we started upon a secondary argument, as to whether we should return to our camp forthwith or

set the wire ineffectively with three-foot stakes. It was determined to pursue the latter course, and our two officers went off to the dug-out of the officer of the regiment in the line, whence two hours later one returned very intoxicated. The eighty of us, now under the supervision of our N.C.O.'s, started in earnest to set concertina wire in front of our lines and within, as presumed, four hundred yards of the enemy.

A new difficulty arose, for it was discovered that only a few, perhaps ten in all, of our large party knew anything about setting concertina or any other wire; and then a great chattering went on before we could divide up our large body of men under the few who knew what was to be done. And then it was that we learned nobody had either gloves or wire-cutters for setting wire. We were not dismayed, but set heartily to work, only and finally to discover we had not nearly sufficient concertina wire to do half the job.

What we wanted that night was twenty men who knew their job and were equipped with wire-cutters and gloves, led by an officer who knew where the dump was and where a supply of material could be found. In fact, we had eighty men who did not know their job, led by two officers who did not know where the dump was, a dump which did not hold the material required. On the depressing march back I said to an old hand, "It's a pity we have not done anything," to which he replied: "It does not matter, Frank. If we had it would not have stopped sheep, and we are fighting Jerry's."

Another experience of Houlthurst Forest: On this occasion we went up to carry wire, etc., to the front lines by night, a large party of us with two officers. The last part of the journey had to be covered on duck-boards over a difficult piece of land. If you fell off the boards or were dragged off by the weight of your load, it was impossible to advance, and only with difficulty could you regain a foothold on the boards. Presently after we had progressed, one of those terrible pauses came, and this within easy rifle and machine-gun fire from the enemy and on a moonlight night.

The officer at the back passed up word inquiring the cause of the delay, but word came back that a party of the Munster Fusiliers blocked the way, and, later, that a party of the Black Watch was the obstacle. What had, in fact, happened was—and this we learnt from exhausted and swearing Irish and Scotch men as they struggled past us with heavy loads—that the Fusiliers on the first occasion, and the Black Watch on the second, had been led with their loads to the wrong place, and they were each from a different direction trying to get back over our duck-boards to make a fresh and perhaps another wrong start. Ultimately we got to our destination, but an officer then put us on a new track home, very much better and shorter than the way we had come; so that in fact none of us ought to have been on those duck-boards. We ought not to have been on them because we were going to the right place the wrong way; and the others ought not to have been on them because

they were returning from the wrong place the right way.

We ought, by the laws of war, to have paid for this adventure with our lives. But if we had it would hardly have mattered. England still echoed with enthusiasm the cry "More men!"

On the morning of January 1, 1918, while we were in billets near Woesten, on morning parade our platoon officer read out an order from Division—or Brigade, I forget which—to the effect that it was learned that great dissatisfaction had been caused by mistakes which had been made in the conduct of fatigue parties, particularly in the danger zone; that the mistakes arose chiefly from delays and uncertainty as to the work to be accomplished, and that in future officers giving, receiving, or executing orders for fatigue parties should exercise care and precision so that there should be no further cause for complaint. The order concluded, *pro forma*, with the instruction that it was to be read twice on parade. I knew this meant it was not to be read twice on parade.

With this preface, I will tell you what we actually did, with the order still in our ears, the remainder of January 1, 1918.

At 1.30 two platoons, approximately sixty men, paraded to go to the vicinity of the front lines at Houlthurst Forest, a distance of seven miles. In the past few days it had alternately snowed, rained, frozen, thawed, and frozen again. On this day the roads were like glass and the difficulty of marching great. Half-way to our destination the floods for a

distance of one hundred and fifty yards raced across the road like a torrent, and at places the swirling water was nearly up to our waists. At 3.45 we arrived at some cross-roads, a place I knew to be a constant target for overhead shells, and the sentry on duty told our officer that no party of men was allowed to pass the post till 4.30. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to sit on the target for three-quarters of an hour and wait for our wet clothes to freeze hard.

At 4.30 we crossed the point and proceeded one hundred and fifty yards. Here we learned that he did not know what we had come up to this spot for. We were to have met an officer of the Royal Engineers, who was to give orders, but he never put in an appearance. Our officer telephoned through to our battalion, and they replied that he was acting under the orders of the Brigade and not the battalion, and he must communicate therefore with the Brigade. Communication having, after a good delay, been established with the Brigade, the order came that we were to "stand by" for an hour and then ring up again. We sat the hour out, and nobody killed us; and then came the order to return to our billets. And so we went again over the glassy roads and through the icy water.

We did not grumble, because it was better to return at once than to work, perhaps to no purpose, and then return. But wars are not won quite in this way, nor the *moral* of troops maintained.

In the best regulated families mistakes occur, and these experiences as surely would not be worth the telling if they were all I could say of mistakes over a

period of twelve months in France. But I do not relate them as isolated experiences—I tell them as typical examples of experiences. I have selected five with great difficulty in the choice from a perfect embarrassment of similar occurrences. And I solemnly here record the fact: I never went as a member of a fatigue party to the front lines during the whole of my time in France when the method, manner, or object of the fatigue was not “messed up”; I can record no exception—the degree of the “mess-up” was all that was ever left in doubt.

I recall that on one occasion my young sergeant came to my dug-out one morning and said: “There’s a fatigue to the front lines to-night. You chaps have got to go.”

I said: “Sergeant, don’t think I want to get out of a job, but I suggest you’d better leave me at home. There’s some fatality about me, for I’ve never been on a fatigue yet which hasn’t been messed up.” He laughed and replied: “It’s not you, old man. I’ve been out here eight months longer than you, and I have never been on one that hasn’t been messed up.”

I should explain that in quoting my sergeant I have substituted “mess-up” for very much stronger words used by my pals and myself.

My views upon fatigues brought me as near severe punishment as I had ever been in the Army. For a time I was in an orderly-room and I had to draw up orders. I am speaking now of the spring of 1918. I put the words “fatigue party” in an order, and the officer to whom I submitted the draft brought it back

to me and explained the words were not to be used in future in orders, but the words "working party" were to be substituted, as "it was thought that men would work better."

I remarked : " Well, sir, if you take a party of men six miles to dig trenches under shell-fire, and forget to provide spades, it's my belief that they will swear just as hard whether you call it a working party or a fatigue party."

It was only a certain regard my officer had for me which saved me from severe punishment for a remark which was in itself an act of indiscipline, but which at the same time was absolutely true.

CHAPTER XI

SIGHTS OF THE NIGHT

ONE night I was standing on high ground, a spot where in the daytime the grouped buildings of a town can be seen, but a town twenty miles away, so that unless the wind blew in our direction ordinary explosions there would not be heard by us. But on this bright moonlight night, though no threatening sound reached my ears from the direction in which I knew the town lay, I saw against the sky lurid splashes of fire dropping. They were bombs from unseen aircraft exploding. Next, high over the town, I saw what appeared to be innumerable palpitating stars, which suddenly came and as suddenly disappeared. This was shrapnel bursting in the defence against the attacking aeroplanes. The spectacle, of which I was a keenly interested observer, lasted for some time. Then the bright splashes of fire broadened into dull patches of red—red which glowed and stayed. I knew that fires had broken out in the town.

I felt the detachment of the spectator who himself feels secure for the moment, and involuntarily I said to a companion: "I have been in many worse places than this." He replied with a characteristic soldier's oath: "Yes, so have I, and many better ones." I could

not dissociate myself from the latter part of his remarks.

And now to turn to relate another and quite a different experience. As a young Tommy pal and I were going very early one morning to our little dug-out bedroom, we heard the distant throb of a Jerry aeroplane. It is a sound with which we had got thoroughly acquainted—nay, in regard to which we may be said to have become experts: knowledge obtained in the school where learning is stimulated by fear. It is not we humans only who have had our senses sharpened in this particular school of experience, for I can confirm and even extend a statement which I read, that a dog had been known to exhibit fear at the approach of an enemy aeroplane. At the little farm at which I was stationed, at the time of which I write, there was a dog tied up. Our aeroplanes were constantly passing, sometimes in batches and sometimes singly, and, indeed, the air was seldom free from their whirr and hum. Of these friendly aircraft the old dog, alert as he was to passing sights and sounds, took no notice. But at the rare intervals at which Jerry's airmen tempted fortune by flying over the English lines, the dog set up a half-howl and bark before our ears could detect the sound of the motor. But from experience we knew that it would come, a little later we actually distinguished it, and soon our guns and searchlights coming into action confirmed the dog's prescience. But neither the dogs nor the birds of the air were our only prophets of peril. Horses are equally sensitive to the menace from the skies. I

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do not know whether all horses are instinctively aware when an enemy aeroplane is approaching, but a horse that has once been close to a falling bomb never forgets. I have heard that a horse which has once had this experience of horror gives a heart-rending cry when an enemy aeroplane is approaching but is as yet far distant.

Here I detach from my diary, just as I wrote them when the impression was fresh in my mind, my notes on a nighttime air fight :

“We stop to listen, and the drone is a deepening sound that comes nearer to us, not rapidly, but with that steady persistence which seems to mark the monotonous crescendo of an oncoming Boche aeroplane. Soon we see our searchlights opening out, carefully and methodically raking the sky in the direction from which the warning sound comes. It is a sound that still increases, and as it increases the probing rays of light become more concentrated. They dart here and there, and presently one flitting ray as it moves is momentarily decorated with what looks like a little silver brooch in the shape of a butterfly. It is the enemy, flying at a great height—too high to bomb effectively, I should think, but as low as he dare come for the operation. Instantly all the searchlights are on or near the spot where the enemy has been seen, like hounds on a discovered trail. Again they dart here and there, but only over a limited area. The hunt is close and exciting, but it is only a matter of seconds, though it seems minutes to the eager

lookers-on, before first one, and then two rays, and then all of them, fix and hold the machine in their revealing grip. At that moment our anti-aircraft guns give tongue—bang! puff; bang! puff, as each successive shell is fired and, after a brief interval, bursts in the air. And now, as Jerry draws close, the attack becomes more furious, and the machine-guns join in and augment the volume of the hostile chorus. And all the while the enemy makes persistent and frantic efforts to shake himself from the grip of those long white arms of the searchlights that so firmly hold him and will not let him go. He turns to the left and to the right, he moves up and he moves down, he tries all ways in turn, and sometimes momentarily he does escape into friendly obscurity. But he is caught again in those tentacles of light, while the voices of the guns ring out remorselessly.

“And now there is a new sound in the sky, which seems to throb with humming engines, and a shout goes up, ‘Ours!’ Level in height with the enemy, and not far behind, another light is seen. And there is an immediate silence from the ground; the guns have stopped, for this is to be a single-handed air combat, and a combat to the death. Jerry had the initial advantage of selected height, but now our machine has the benefit of light from the assisting rays to discern its enemy, while it avoids itself coming within their revealing beams. Matters will be equalized as the two machines close.

“Now Jerry fires with his machine-guns, again—and again. Anxiously we ask, ‘Will he escape?’ or,

in a real tremor even worse than that, 'May he win?' Another question rises to our lips. He is nearly overhead at this fateful minute, and we ask, 'Will he unload his death-dealing cargo in order to make it easier to escape, or in his death struggle?'

"Prudently we get near our dug-out, ready for a dive directly the whistle of a shell comes. Meanwhile we watch, and from above the enemy little white streaks trace the track of tracer bullets, and there comes to our ears the snap-snap-snap of a machine-gun. But before we hear the noise from a distant shot there is a sudden glow as of a light from a signal. There is a shout. 'Hit!' Cheers by us break out. They are taken up by French troops, and echoed by Australians, Canadians, and Americans.

"The light becomes a glare, and we see that the enemy is making for earth. The engines are increasing in speed, for control has been lost. . . . The engines are racing, but still he falls, falls from the aerial heights he has proudly climbed to the hard earth. His powerful engines roar in the still night; the glow becomes a great radiating flare; and at last he comes to the ground with a mighty crash. The skies are lit up with flame. There is an awful, eerie silence, and then an earth-shaking cataract of sound tells us that his deadly bombs have exploded.

"It was a mighty aeroplane, with a crew of nine men—all of whom perished—that thus met its death. The monster never had a chance when it was once tackled by a single-seater Britisher."

This is only an incident, a single incident from a series of no less thrilling daily and nightly events. The world will probably never fully know the debt that it owed to our daring and gallant aviators in the later periods of the Great War, whether they themselves have gone bombing, or it has been their task to ward off the bombing machines of the enemy; whether they have been reconnoitring or have prevented the enemy from reconnoitring; or whether they were fighting over the enemy lines. These faithful guardians of the skies rested neither night nor day, and they made it almost impossible for Jerry to leave the ground, for he was immediately attacked when he did.

CHAPTER XII

PILL-BOXES

IN the autumn of 1917 a good deal was written in the public Press of pill-boxes. At that time in places we had pressed back or bitten into the German lines, and so possessed ourselves of the concrete structures erected by the enemy.

It was the German pill-boxes then that were spoken of, and generally spoken of as if the Germans were the originators of this method of defence warfare. They may have been, but certainly the French too, at a comparatively early stage of the war, had concreted dug-outs which did not differ greatly in design, object, and construction from those of the Germans. So far as my actual observation went, the Germans had perfected and enlarged the French idea, and had introduced a system and a completeness in the use of these buildings.

The structures in my experience were always made of reinforced concrete, and from whatever source the concrete was obtained a very considerable quantity was, in fact, utilized, and a tribute must be paid to the German thoroughness in constructing these buildings—always, I suppose, within shell-fire of the enemy. While the construction, as I have said, in my experience was universal, the design and size varied to a

great degree. In point of size I saw pill-boxes constructed to hold no more than six persons—and probably a smaller number, for it is difficult to say where a “concreted dug-out” ended and a pill-box commenced. On the other hand, I occupied a pill-box, which I describe later in the chapter, capable of holding a small company say of 100 men.

The design was even more varied than the size, and only one common feature prevailed, and that was the head-space allowed, which was always less than five and a half feet. This feature was essential inasmuch as the total height of the building was a feature in its relation to the necessity of making the building as bad a target as possible. The design varied from a mere concrete shallow box, with one small entrance through which one crawled, to a building with several compartments; and in the case of one pill-box I occupied a gun emplacement was covered in, saving for a sufficient space to allow the gun to range at front, and to be withdrawn from position at rear, while on either side was a compartment giving the gun-team cover. Some of these pill-boxes were entirely submerged in the earth, and many of them were partly submerged, with the idea, no doubt, of making the structures as unnoticeable as targets as possible.

It is probably a debatable point whether pill-boxes as defence works were as effective as the trenches which they replaced, and only a military expert can decide this point. Certain it is that they were better targets than trenches could ever be, though I am of opinion that only a direct shell-hit could penetrate them, and

they were a complete defence against bullets and splinters. But in this they had no advantage over trenches to counterbalance the better target afforded on the one hand, and the labour and expense on the other.

But it may be hazarded that they had three possible advantages over trenches : (1) They afforded greater comfort and weather protection to the occupiers. (2) It is possible that one direct hit by a light shell would not have penetrated—though the occupants may have been gravely injured and perhaps killed without penetration. (3) They give a feeling, if misplaced, of additional security, and this counts for something, notwithstanding that the Press at the time suggested that the German soldiers were refusing to enter these traps.

On the question of penetration I may add that the thickness of the walls of the structures varied from six inches to three feet of reinforced concrete.

My first experience of a pill-box proper was in the north-west of Houlthurst Forest, where the French had earlier in the year captured ground. There were two compartments with an intervening gun emplacement. The compartment in which I was quartered was roughly 8 feet by 11 feet by 4 feet, and into this we managed to crowd a section about seven strong.

My second experience in a pill-box was for four days and four nights, and I was one of a party of seven closely confined in a compartment measuring roughly 11 feet by 8 feet by 4 feet. There we sat huddled by day and by night, but chiefly by day, for at night we

were frequently out, doing fatigue work if needed, and always at periods during the night drawing supplies or rations for the next twenty-four hours. It was dangerous to disclose our presence, and the day sentry occupied a concealed position.

Sometimes we slept, sometimes we talked, sometimes we played cards, and sometimes we cooked and ate. Cooking was not without its difficulties in the confined space to which we were restricted, particularly as we dare not let smoke appear by day or light by night. But we managed—sometimes, and till we ran out of them, with patent trench-fires, and then with dry wood, cut with our knives as thin almost as shavings to prevent smoke, and sometimes with candles, but we always managed to make our tea and cook our rasher.

Things were very quiet while we were in the pill-box, and personally I had no experience of shells falling close while thus encased, for this only happened for a short period during our stay, and then I was on gas duty at another box. My companions told me on my return that the place had seemed to rock a bit once during the shelling.

And now an experience of a larger pill-box.

I remember the night when we moved off from our station of comparative comfort in support to take up our new posts. It was bitterly cold, and the keen frost following heavy snow made the roads in a fearful condition, and loaded as we were—as every infantryman is loaded in these days—with arms, ammunition, and rations, our position was not unlike that of a horse

overladen and unroughed on an ice-bound road. Matters were bad, but they soon became worse, for we had not accomplished half our journey when a blinding snowstorm came on. Strange, white-cloaked figures, we struggled heavily through the thick, ever-falling curtain of snow.

Ultimately we reached our post. What a post it was!—a half-covered-in shell-hole. This, I reflected, was to be our "home" for two days and nights. Perhaps a civilian might have looked forward to the nights, when the thermometer would be at its lowest, with special apprehension, but with my previous experience of this type of warfare I knew that night would be better than day, for under the cover of darkness we could move about and so keep comparatively warm, but that in the day there must be no movement under the eye of a watchful foe. I confess my reflections were not unmixed with some personal apprehensions, such as I suppose come to every soldier, even to a campaigner much more hardened than I was, under such circumstances. Trench feet or fever, I reflected, could hardly be escaped this time.

But these were futile forebodings, for I had not been in my new post with my companions more than a few minutes when a runner arrived with orders to me to proceed at once to company headquarters. And when I arrived there I found orders for me to proceed with another man on a special mission.

It was in this wise: Our company was the extreme left of the British line, and we were supported on the left by the extreme right of the Belgian line, and the

boundary of the Belgian line was a pill-box. The duty assigned to a companion and myself was to go and take up our quarters with the Belgians in their pill-box, and thus keep ourselves in touch with them and their doings. We were directed to report ourselves twice daily, at "Stand to," night and morning, at our company headquarters.

It was made obvious that the selection of my companion and myself was based upon our age, thirty-nine and forty respectively, rather than our merits—and this by the youngest officer of our battalion, who was celebrated for his strictness and, indeed, harshness. I believe no one would deny that a selection on this basis in such circumstances savoured more of the young officer's kindness and good sense than of partial or unfair selection, and I here record that I do not remember an officer according any favour to me which could not be justified on grounds of fairness; and at the same time I record that no one officer treated me with more severity than others, although there might have been the pardonable temptation to do so simply to avoid either the fact or imputation of partiality.

On this occasion to my mind the task allotted to me was less dangerous than the one I had just left, and, above all, in contrast with the deadly monotony of forty-eight hours in that freezing shell-hole, it gave me four days of extraordinary and varied interest, and some excitement. The first item of excitement was to get to the position I was to take up at night without going into the enemy lines. That is always on such missions a danger which one needs to specially guard

against, for there are few landmarks in a locality across which artillery fire has been steadily sweeping for a few months, reducing the natural scenery and contour of the countryside to ragged tree-tops and monotonous shell-holes.

I have said that my companion and myself were obviously selected for the work on the basis of age. We two were nearly, if not quite, the oldest men in the fighting line of the company, and this was "a young man's war." Incidents have often come under my notice which illustrated this, and sometimes the illustrations had an air of tragi-comedy about them. I have seen a youth of twenty fall headlong over three strands of barbed wire in twenty yards, and get up laughing. But the man of forty, or approaching that age, who has turned soldier probably after years of sedentary life and little exercise, when he falls over three strands of barbed wire in twenty yards is very far from laughing when he picks himself up.

There are many other matters in which such differences in capacity as "a first-class fighting-man" show themselves signally—and often painfully. We of the older generation were very ready to recognize—we had the lesson brought home to us daily—that our young officers and N.C.O.'s had qualities and capacities for endurance which we necessarily lacked; and it was well that our young officers mercifully recognized their own superiority in these capacities. And their recognition explained the selection which took me from my frozen shell-hole on the little mission to which I have referred.

On arriving at the indicated pill-box I found by such inspection as I was then and in the succeeding four days able to make that the pill-box was one with four compartments. One was assigned to a Belgian officer, and the remaining three and the passages to a small company of Belgians. After reporting ourselves to the Belgian officer, who could speak English, we threw in our lot with the Belgians in one compartment, and they assigned to us sufficient floor space to lie down.

Beyond our two daily journeys to our company to report, and for rations, and an occasional message from the Belgian officer to our officers, we had nothing to do but observe our new companions and their doings.

And here, too, we were fortunate, for we found several Belgians who could make themselves understood by us. One had been in England as a waiter, and could speak tolerable English. He was a very amusing little fellow, and during our stay with his companions he made it his special and particular job to attend to the requirements and entertainment of the two British soldiers. Incidentally he sang, and so far as the height of the compartment permitted it, he danced to us. Although we drew our rations from our own company he insisted upon supplying us with daily rations from the Belgians. He would bring us hot coffee twice a day when his ration party returned, and hot Irish stew. Although from the tins which I saw it seemed that the English Government was rationing the Belgian troops, this group at all events

seemed to be faring rather better in food than was our lot. I noticed particularly that while their bread was inferior to ours in quality, it seemed almost unlimited in quantity. I commented upon this one day to a Belgian, and with twinkling eye he replied: "Belge no bread—Belge no fight; therefore beaucoup de bread for Belge."

During my stay with the Belgians I formed a high opinion of them both as individuals and for their soldierly qualities. I must confess that, British-like, without any evidence in support of my view, I had formed rather a low estimate of their merits compared with our own; but a closer knowledge dispelled this idea, and substituted an understanding why the Belgians had put up so good a fight during the early part of the war.

The Belgians during the day were in the habit of working immediately behind the pill-box, preparing wire and other defences for quick placing in position in front of their lines at night. Familiarity breeds contempt, and the Belgians did not always confine their working operations and movements immediately behind the screen of the pill-box, with the result that Jerry discovered their presence and habits. This discovery had its sequel, for one day a single shrapnel shell burst overhead—for range purposes, I believe, and certainly with some fright to us, but no damage. But that same evening at twilight, a most likely time for movements to commence, Jerry put over one, and only one, shell, landing immediately at the rear of our pill-box. The price was two killed and two wounded.

The result of these two shells was well above the average, and it is an instance of the method of the Germans at all events towards the end of the war. I noticed that they were in the habit of rushing over one or two surprise shots on likely objectives such as cross-roads with very fine accuracy, so I think that there was no waste with the Germans—probably for a very good reason.

Now our methods were different, for I have seen our artillery shell cross-roads or other likely chosen objectives, and maintain the shelling for a long while. But of course the result of the shelling must have depended, so I should think, upon the result of the initial shots, for even the Germans do not, I imagine, loaf about cross-roads smoking cigars after the shelling has commenced, nor indeed for some considerable time after it has ended.

I do not say this in disparagement of the English artillery—far from it—for I have no reason to believe that they were less accurate. Nor do I suggest that they were without method or reason. Again far from it!—for the cry “Munitions!” had gone up, and they had all their work cut out, at this date at all events, to get rid of the supply.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTMAS AND LEAVE

COMFORT is a comparative term. After months of journeys with rest-places under the open sky, in tents, in sheds, in dug-outs, we arrived at a French military hut at Chauny Camp. It was a simple hut, but with beds (two decks) made by stretching sheep-netting over joists, and thus we got a long row of extemporized spring-mattresses. With this hut and its furniture we were quite delighted. A brazier, made by piercing a biscuit-tin, completed our household appointments and our joy.

One winter's afternoon, after a march, we left the main road, fell into Canadian file, and took a zigzag path through a wood, beautified by a silver frost and a setting sun, a distance of three-quarters of a mile; and on the far side and fringe of the wood we came to a farming homestead, and, in this group of buildings, to a little bakehouse, measuring some eighteen feet by eight, whose function it was to supply the bread for the homestead. This bakehouse was to be the dwelling-place of seven chums and myself for some days, including Christmas Day. The scene was pretty, and only a distant rumble spoke of war.

The British soldier is not a vandal, but at this period of the year a fire is a prime necessity with him,

for on its possession depend all his little comforts—warmth, extra cooking, toasting, shaving and washing in some degree of comfort, and good laundry-work. And the British Tommy will dare much to maintain a fire for a few hours. At no time is a fire more important to him than at and near Christmas, especially in the severe weather which we were experiencing; and so immediately on our arrival at our new home we scattered for fuel, and in a surprisingly short time we had made a brazier, and laid in a stock of wood, say, for twelve hours—a long time in the calendar of Tommy Atkins.

The days went by and Christmas drew near, and there was a rumour, hourly becoming stronger and more detailed—though the details were varied and sometimes contradictory—to the general effect that, in addition to pudding, we were to have turkey for Christmas—the latter, so I gathered, out of regimental funds. Confirmation of this rumour came in a demand for a fatigue party, of whom I was one, to construct a field oven to cook the dinner. I found the construction of the oven a most interesting business, and nobody was more surprised than I that it efficiently carried out the duty for which it was designed.

And here let me say that if the good food supplied to the troops had been supplied with a greater care for its suitability, and when received had been distributed to the best advantage in the circumstances, a much less quantity would have been needed. If ever we are allowed to see accounts it will be found that the British troops never could have consumed the food

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shipped to them. I judge this, not upon any knowledge I have of the quantity supplied, but by the knowledge of the amount wasted, and which went to destinations not anticipated by the shippers. Tins of bully-beef, for instance, assumed more the nature of currency than food for the British troops.

I take the following from my diary :

“It is Christmas eve, and our duties have ended by mid-day. Domestic requirements, *e.g.*, getting and chopping a supply of wood, obtaining a few additional stores—for we have many parcels and good things from Blighty—and securing a little stock of English beer from a distant canteen, occupy us till tea-time, and then we settle down. More parcels arrive during the evening; we are so grateful to our friends in England! The eight of us settle down for a few happy hours, entertaining one another with many a song.

“On Christmas morning we had an extra hour in ‘kip’ and only one parade, and then marched to a village not far distant, in flat but wooded and pretty surroundings, to a Church Army Hut for Divine service. It was a service simple but impressive. The Christmas hymns seemed to be roared rather than sung, so great was the volume of sound from rough male voices. I had never heard the officiating Chaplain before. For that packed audience of war-worn men it was a great sermon. He besought us with much earnestness on this birthday of the Prince of Peace to pray devoutly that peace might come again

to the world, and we were all greatly impressed when, sobbing like a child, he concluded his sermon with the words: 'Boys, notwithstanding all the mud and blood, there is a God!' He spoke to us as a man who had nearly given up his firm faith, but had then, by a great struggle, and in spite of surrounding evidence that undermined it, re-established it from inward conviction, but who feared that others had entirely lost their faith. He must have known by the proportion of the congregation who remained for the Communion service that his appeal had not fallen on deaf ears.

"We walked back in little parties across the fields, and then to our Christmas dinner of turkey and pudding. After that we made a common stock of our little stores which good friends had sent us, and, be it admitted, we feasted and made merry for the rest of the day. Our officers kindly supplied us with port and beer to complete the feast."

Christmas over, we moved, and arrived in the support lines; and then next day, after breakfast (bread, bacon, and tea) at 4 a.m., we went to forward positions to perform what turned out to be a very arduous fatigue—at least, so I found it—the carrying of rails and duck-boards for the improvement of routes to the front lines. The support lines were some miles from the place of work, and when I arrived back, about 2 p.m., and we had had our dinner, I fell asleep on the floor by the side of a cheerful fire. But I did not sleep long, for a pal from company headquarters touched me on the shoulder. "Chum," he said, "you

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are for leave to-night. It's not official, but you will be officially warned in half an hour." And so I was.

It was never made clear to me why in ninety-nine cases out of one hundred men never had a chance of telling their friends when they were going on leave, but had a day's notice—if as long as that. I was told to report at the battalion's headquarters in an hour's time, ready to move off. I wonder whether anyone in old Blighty who had not himself passed through the experience realizes what to be "warned for leave" meant to us out in France. It meant a return to comfort, a return to those you hold dear and who hold you dear, a return to them safe and sound after times during which you never expected to see home again. The feeling and impression differed, I suppose, in different individuals. With me my home-going feelings were rather like those I used to have on the last day of the school term, but they were greatly intensified, because all the emotions are infinitely deeper in a man approaching forty than in a schoolboy of fifteen.

On such occasions it is interesting to note the demeanour of those who receive these welcome tidings. Some are quite noisily demonstrative; others receive the good news in silence and with no outward show of emotion. Here is a case which came under my own observation. I was sleeping in a dug-out next to the lucky man, a lance-corporal. He was our senior lance-corporal, but he had never been in charge of even a section, because he did not like to be in a position of authority or responsibility. He did not lead men, but

rather ran by their side, encouraging and sympathizing with them. It is a lamentable fact that he was frequently rebuked for his lax conduct when he was in charge of men, but he only looked positively dejected at the idea that he should be expected to keep men in order. I fear it must be admitted that he was not a great leader, and yet I believe we all liked to be near Charlie in danger. Well, as I slept by him, a head was thrust into the doorway. "Charlie," said a voice, "you're for leave at eight this morning." Charlie turned to me. "Leave's all right," he said, "it's the coming back . . ." There was eloquence in his unfinished sentence. "Anyhow," he added, "I'll have another hour's sleep," and he turned and slept profoundly till nearly eight o'clock, when I roused him.

When I was warned I quickly put my things together, and took no risk of being late at headquarters. Then I had to attend before a sergeant for passes and papers, before the medical officer for a certificate that I was free from vermin and scabies, and then I had to go to the Major to draw my ration money and sugar-card—for we, too, had sugar-cards. All this occupied some time, for there were long intervals between the various interviews; but I had a pal at headquarters on the police staff, and he took me to the guard-room—a barn, in fact—where there was a bright fire, to wait.

And now, the medical inspection over and the certificate that we were free from scabies and lice received, we were at liberty to start our journey. But I must say a word of the medical inspection. I was one of

only two actually examined out of sixteen perhaps. It might have been an unlucky selection in this random examination, but my examination was cursory, and the fact that I was infested with lice did not prevent me getting the coveted certificate of freedom from them. Was I not in the Army? and it was the certificate and not the fact that mattered.

In later times, by the way, I found that greater care was exercised in seeing that no man boarded a boat without a certificate, but as a set-off by that time a certificate could be purchased at the rest-camps of the ports. Again, that market was seriously injured by the fact that we of experience met the greater vigilance of the port officials by signing our own certificates "A. Smith, Captain, R.A.M.C."

And now we set out. My companion was my old friend the small-holder who came out with my draft, and who was afterwards killed at St. Quentin. After a trudge which under other circumstances would have been wearisome, but which the reward in view made light and easy, we reached the railhead. Here we found we had a long time to wait. We knew before starting that this would be so, but schoolboy-like—and a man going on leave has the feelings of a veritable schoolboy—we started as soon as we were allowed to get away, and careless of the amount of time which as a result would have to be killed later in uncomfortable quarters. But the wait was not so uncomfortable between the hours of 10 p.m. and 2 a.m., for there was a Y.M.C.A., that soldiers' haven; and here hundreds of men crowded in, all going on leave. They were

collected together from units and divisions in the vicinity, all with the same object and therefore in the same spirits—differently displayed perhaps, but all happy. Some slept—there was just room on the floor to curl up like a dog for this purpose; some sang, some drank coffee, and some smoked.

The train arrived and we all crushed into it, and for the only time during all my journeys in France I travelled, as did all of us, in a passenger carriage. All my other experiences were of crowds in trucks, sometimes hot, always draughty, and sometimes cold—on one occasion so cold that, during one of the waits which were the settled habit of these troop-trains in France, we secured a pail and wood from the rail-side and made a fire. Then our truck was very warm, very smoky, and still very draughty.

We arrived at our port, and then began the tiring march up those long hills the soldiers know so well to rest-camps in the country surrounding Calais. The march is weary and painful, for it spells delay. On this occasion, however, the delay was only for a few hours, for then we were told to fall in and march to the boat.

The boat was off and made for the open sea, and as she did so in company with other boats, torpedo-destroyers seemed to spring from every side to escort us to England; and so escorted, we raced for home. Thus did England day in and day out protect her troops in their passage over the sea.

On arrival we rushed from the boat for the boat-

train, and into this those swift of foot packed themselves. What a crush it was ! but never a murmur or complaint or grumble from the occupants, for we were bound for home.

We arrived at Victoria late at night, but not too late for those great workers who, year after year during the war, often at unsuspected self-sacrifice, ministered to the comfort of Tommy when the leave-train put him down at that famous terminus. The services, often all that lay in the power of the giver to perform, might perhaps seem small to some. But they did not seem small to us. Those ladies who served refreshment to the arriving Tommies, and those gentlemen, often old and worn, who shepherded the Tommies to many points, created a sense of real gratitude and a feeling that Tommy was appreciated. That did much to maintain the high spirit of the troops in the field.

Nor did the kindness end at Victoria. On arrival at Paddington similar kindly gentlemen were there to tell you your train and conduct you to the similar kindly ladies for refreshment. And this kindness and care were not without practical utility either, for on the one hand Tommy, being used to the ministrations of officers and N.C.O.'s, had long ceased to use the powers necessary to get him either to the right station or, once there, to the right train. And again refreshment was very necessary, for in our schoolboy anxiety for home we had missed many opportunities for food in the last twenty-four hours. And so when I had partaken of refreshment, both at Victoria and Paddington, gratuitously, and remaining unsatisfied,

not because hospitality failed, but because I felt that there were limits beyond which in accepting generosity one was imposing upon it, I went to the ordinary refreshment-room to complete my feast. But even here the unorganized kindness of England to her troops asserted itself, for a dear old gentleman, knowing from whence I came by my pack, stepped up to the counter after I had completed my order and said to the waitress: "I pay for this. I wish I could do more for my country. This man has done his bit on the other side."

CHAPTER XIV

GENERAL POST

I WAS back in France with leave only as a happy memory. I had left my companions in support at Houlthurst Forest, but on my return I found they had gone into rest in the vicinity of Proven; and immediately on my return to that muddy encampment, where we were housed in bow-huts, my mates round the fireside deluged me with explanations of our change.

I gathered from the medley of explanation that we had left the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division, and were going to join the 53rd Brigade of the 18th Division in another part of the British line, in consequence of a recasting of the organization of our forces whereby brigades were cut down from four battalions to three, and the Divisions consequently weakened to the extent of three battalions.

It was now February, 1918, and, without much knowledge of military matters, one would have supposed that a change so drastic as this, and with results so important as to warrant Field-Marshal Haig offering them as one explanation of what ensued in March, that this change, whether beneficial or not, would not have been embarked upon so late as February. It was reasonable to suppose that one side or the other

would contemplate a move in the spring, as early as weather permitted, after the enforced inactivities of the winter; and also that this pause would have served (in fact, it did serve the Germans) to accomplish any recasting and preparation that was necessary. And yet we in February, on the very eve of the period of renewed activity, were engaged in introducing an entirely new formation and new regiments to new brigades. To my mind it is equally immaterial whether we ought to have attacked in the early spring, whether we were in a position to do so or not, and whether we were aware that the enemy contemplated an attack. Certain it is to the man in the street that nothing was likely to happen in the winter, and something was likely to happen in the spring, and therefore the spring was no time for a "general post."

The rumours to which my friends gave voice proved to be correct, for after a few days we moved off one night to a railhead, entrained in cattle-trucks—there were fifty-two of us in my truck—and after a long, weary journey we came to a place near Noyon. Here for a few days, in the laudable attempt to keep us occupied, we did, by way of fatigue, work better left undone. I do not know that anything has discouraged me more in this world than doing work with the knowledge that it was either palpably unnecessary or actually undesirable, and I did a fearful amount of work of this type in the Army. Still, as a general principle, I think I could bring myself to accept the idea that it is better to keep men employed on unnecessary work than to let them be idle. But in

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February, 1918, and throughout the winter, there was work not only necessary, but urgently imperative, and yet—will anybody deny it?—a dense crowd of men stood among us, through France, her ports through England and Whitehall, doing some unnecessary work, some damaging work, and some no work at all. I do not think I am wrong in saying that one of the difficulties of recruiting was the knowledge, built up on solid foundations, that men of great utility and value—if only to themselves—in civil life were recruited, in response to the yell of the moment, to serve no better purpose than either to do unnecessary work, or perhaps to form one of a party of five to do the necessary work of one man, and always work unsuited to the men's capacities. For a poet to act as the sanitary man of a camp may sound romantic, but like most romances it was costly, and did not help much.

From Noyon we marched to Jussy, where we halted for a few days in an encampment of French military huts.

An incident of some interest took place here. We had an inspection of ammunition, and it was well we should, as we were then almost within rifle range of the enemy and well within shell-fire. We were inspected by platoons, and whether the inspection was there, or in the Lewis-gun limber which carried ammunition for the Lewis guns, the shortage was frightful. It was such that I estimated that, if the same shortage existed in all battalions—and I have no reason for supposing we were exceptional—then the

Army shortage represented at the current value something like three-quarters of a million. And how could there be other than a shortage, seeing that we Tommies habitually threw ammunition away to avoid breaking our hearts by carrying it all over France, and as habitually made up the deficit on the eve of inspection by theft from the Lewis-gun limber?

We were not punished for the deficit, for both our company and platoon officers were good sorts, and our platoon officer was a man of the world to boot. He took the view that the deficit must in fact be made up, and moreover he had seen, during a walk, an ammunition dump in the district. He suggested that a transfer of 10,000 rounds from this dump to his platoon was possible, and he staked six bottles of beer on his opinion. His hint was tactfully conveyed to six likely men of our platoon, and so the deficit was wiped out.

From Jussy we went to Clastres, where we found work for four days. Our work was to dig trenches—a new type of trench at that, one wider at the top than those we had been used to—the object of which, we gathered, was to form a defence against the progress of Tanks.

We understood, as was the fact, that we had been lent for this daily digging to the 14th Division in conjunction with other units of our Division. We gathered—and the orders we received left us no room to think otherwise—that the work was urgent, and as I have indicated, the work was defensive rather than offensive.

It was here, or near here, that the Germans in fact first broke through on March 21, so that we may conclude that at the date of which I am speaking our side anticipated an attack and recognized, late as it was to recognize it, that preparations were necessary. Nevertheless, after this we went back to Caillouel, and for a fortnight indulged in a boring repetition of promiscuous training, while it is obvious that the defences in front of Clastres remained far from complete, while immediately on our right in the position which, as it will appear hereafter, we occupied later, the defences were more incomplete still. I am speaking of technical military questions—the completeness or deficiency of defences—without expert knowledge, but I am supported by hard facts within my own observation.

I left France on March 26, 1918, and returned on May 26. On my return I found that behind the British lines, at intervals, trench after trench had appeared during my absence. Now I make bold to say if half the trenches and precautions which existed behind our lines in May, 1918, had been there in March, the risk to which England was subjected in that month could never have arisen. But we failed to provide these defences at the right moment, chiefly, if I caught the true spirit of the hour, because we were inflated with a sense of our superiority over the enemy, and absorbed in our future measures rather than sensible of our present defects. And so what preparations we made were belated, and while we talked of future measures towards a beaten enemy, we selected an inopportune time for recasting our formations.

CHAPTER XV

ST. QUENTIN

My company had gone into the front lines north of La Fontaine, immediately in front of St. Quentin, at a distance of some four miles.

I had already seen St. Quentin when I was at work digging trenches at Clastres while lent to the 14th Division, an episode to which I have already referred.

I was sent back from my company to our transport lines at Frieres Wood, to act temporarily as storeman to my company quartermaster-sergeant during the absence on leave for fourteen days of his regular storeman.

My duty, as I understood it at the time of my appointment, was to take the rations up in a limber to my company on alternate days with the company quartermaster-sergeant, after we had both gone up together on the first day to become acquainted with the route. As, however, we were ordered up either a different route, or the same route to a different place each day, we never in fact became acquainted with both the route and the place; so perforce we both went up each day together, till our little daily outings were stopped by the wilful and malicious conduct of the enemy, as will be detailed in the next chapter.

I also understood when my temporary appointment was made that I was being given a light and safe job

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for a period. The following experiences as a selection will indicate how far these representations and acceptances were built upon solid foundations.

Here I fall back upon my diary :

“ On the first day, among other details, a quartermaster-sergeant of each of the four companies of our battalion left the battalion accompanied by their storemen and batmen (of whom I was one). We marched in full marching order—that is, with full pack—to the transport lines, a distance of some five miles from the point of our departure.

“ On our arrival at our billets our first duty was to draw rations for our respective companies from the Quartermaster of the regiment, and this we did, and then loaded them on a limber for transport to the lines.

“ Our limber being loaded, we must set out to take the rations to our pals in the trenches, a distance of some eight miles. My chief and I walked behind the limber—it was our duty to guard the rations in our charge—and so we went forward. We arrived as near our headquarters as possible without any event happening. We went to headquarters and announced our arrival, and a fatigue party was sent out to take in the rations.

“ Now our idea was to ride back in the limber, which is permitted ; but, on the other hand, the order held by the driver is to clear immediately he has discharged his load, so that the horses and limber may run no unnecessary risk. Unfortunately we delayed in return-

ing to the limber, and when we attempted to do so it had gone.

"We thought, with a little irritation, perhaps, of the miles before us, but we were in good enough spirits. We returned to headquarters, had a drink of tea and something to eat, and were then shown a short-cut home. Now I don't think either of us had a gift of locality; anyway, after wandering among barbed-wire and trenches for an hour and three-quarters, our dominant feeling was one of relief to find ourselves back at headquarters. And now we set out to return by the road by which we had come. We were tired, but we knew that it was very desirable to cover a large part of our journey before full daylight, for there are parts of the road within view of the enemy. On through the night a pair of very weary men pushed their way. When daylight came we knew that we had again lost the route! Wherever we were or had to go the coming of full daylight had removed all need for haste, and we lay down by the roadside and fell sound asleep. But we had not slept ten minutes when the pattering of rain on our faces awoke us. We rose and wearily trudged on.

"We had not covered much more of the journey before we were very wet and uncomfortable. I was greatly fatigued, too, and at last I felt that I could only get a short distance farther; but fortunately we came to a main road, and a dilapidated cottage which housed the cooking staff of a Royal Engineer company. Within we could see a bright fire, and, drawn by this lure, we went and asked whether we could not come

in and rest and dry our clothes. We received a warm welcome. We told our genial hosts that we had been walking practically continuously since the afternoon of the previous day, and hereupon they gave each of us a hunk of bread, some cold ham, and a quart of hot tea. What a meal that was! Our fast and our weariness gave it a relish which no sybarite banquet that wealth could command would have supplied. After our meal we decided to continue our journey, hoping that some vehicle would pick us up. It did not, however, until our weary tramp was nearly over. At last we arrived, lame and footsore, at our billets.

"A rest would have been comforting, but we had much to do before we started our next journey. When we did start it, in the rain, all went well until we were near our destination, when Jerry began shelling. Fortunately the shells did not fall too close to our limber, but they fell sufficiently close to make us hasten our movements, and it was decided that the limber should race off and wait for us a mile away. That meant yet another mile to walk. At the end of it we got into the limber with an oil-sheet over us, but, tired as we were, the jolting and shaking of the return journey banished sleep. We got to our billets in the early hours, had supper (provided by a lucky parcel), and so to bed. We had then been forty-four hours with only ten minutes' sleep, and we estimated that in the forty-four hours we had walked fifty miles. We thanked goodness that we had little to do before we started on our third journey on the morrow.

"A word about the third journey. All went well

during the first part of it, but I think we were a little before our time. When we went over a hill we knew we had been seen, and we were reminded of our mistake by an overhead shrapnel shell and four high-explosive shells. I don't quite know how close they came, but I know I was amazed, when I had recovered my self-possession, to find that we had all closed up again—for we and the horses had scattered—and that the only damage we had sustained was a scratch on the face of one of our fellows, and the scorching of the coat of our chief. The remainder of our journey was uneventful, as was also the return journey. On our return we had a nice little supper awaiting us.

“On our fourth visit no incident of interest occurred until we were a mile on our return journey, when we saw our S.O.S. go up, and immediately a fierce and reciprocated bombardment burst forth. Of course, we had no notion at all of the reason for this letting loose of the power of the guns, but we were fully alive to the importance of getting out of the danger zone as quickly as possible, not only to escape from personal peril, but to get our transport back before the artillery fire destroyed the roads. The first part of the journey lay parallel to the line, and along we raced, and as we did so S.O.S. signals went up along the line and seemed to follow and pursue us. What a relief it was to get into a reasonably safe position!—and it was only on arrival there, and after we had lit cigarettes, that we realized that we had been nearly shaken to a jelly during the ride to safety through darkness.

“These experiences were sufficient to satisfy me that

the lines near St. Quentin were 'none too healthy,' as the soldiers say."

In March activities were increasing. I have often wondered whether our Higher Command had it in mind that an attack was about to be delivered, and that the point of attack would be here; or whether they proposed to make an attack elsewhere, either without knowledge of this pending attack, or as a counter-move against a pending attack of which they had knowledge.

Without being in the confidence of the Higher Command it is difficult to criticize—at least, it is difficult to measure the extent and nature of the criticism.

My journeys from the transport lines situate in Frieres Wood to our front lines at La Fontaine, and my previous knowledge of the district on our left, made me to some extent acquainted with the nature of the ground. To get from our transport lines to the front lines, the St. Quentin Canal had to be crossed.

Speaking as I always do without claiming a military knowledge beyond that acquired by a private, I hazard the opinion that the lines and position we held were entirely unsuitable to meet an attack of any magnitude. I should say that at the point of which I speak we could have fallen back and given ground with very great advantage to the defending force. I should have thought that the ground we held was more suitable as a "jumping-off" ground for attack than for receiving an attack.

I remember in contradiction to this that, before the attack, I was assured by an officer that it was impossible for the Germans to deliver an attack by reason of the nature of the intervening ground; but I must point out that, notwithstanding this confident opinion, the Germans did in fact attack, successfully too, and with results which proved almost disastrous to us.

On other occasions—Passchendael, for instance—I have thought that conquered ground would have been better left unconquered, or if conquered it would have been cheaper to have given it up immediately, for we won and held many grounds, ultimately to be lost, which in my view would not have justified the price even if successfully held.

I repeat, with the limitations of my knowledge already admitted, that even if the ground we held at St. Quentin was desirable as a site upon which to make an attack, our preparations ill fitted us to receive an attack. I say that our trenches, if sufficient and with sufficient protection in themselves, had no sufficient trenches into which to fall back if the slightest amount of ground had to be given. It seemed to me that the lines once broken into, resort had to be had to open warfare—a very hazardous defence.

Even old trenches at our backs, used in previous phases of the Somme battle, had not been made efficient.

It may be said by those with greater knowledge than myself that the defences were sufficient, or, alternatively, that we had no labour to make them sufficient; but to this I should make two answers. The first is,

that there were crowds of men throughout the previous winter who could and would have been more usefully employed in preparing trenches than in being bored with exercises to keep them in condition. The second is, that leaving France soon after March 21 (and I have made this point before, but it is of such importance that I do not hesitate to emphasize it), I returned in less than two months to our then first lines, but before I got there I had to pass over many trenches covering a great depth of country; and I do say that if these same trenches, which had sprung into existence in less than two months, had been at the back of our first lines in March instead of the back of our lines in May, the disaster of March, with its irredeemable sacrifice, would have found no place in history.

CHAPTER XVI

MARCH 21

I WAS back from the front lines in a little hut in Frieres Wood, and here one of my duties, with the runners working with me, was to receive and transmit orders and despatches, and on the afternoon of March 20 I received an order, "Prepare for battle." I do not know that the message caused me any great excitement; indeed, such a message was hardly likely to cause me excitement at the spot where I was, and which seemed quite safe. I transmitted the message, noted the time of arrival, and later I received a message in confirmation. "Prepare for battle!" Well, the despatch-riders who came to see me then and later seemed as cheerful and talkative as ever. Nothing happened until 10.30 that night, when a fierce but common and ordinary bombardment started. It soon died down, and, except for a crash now and then, ended at 11.15 p.m.

There were six of us Tommies together, and we huddled up and went to sleep fully clothed. Of course, there were sentries vigilantly guarding us. At 4.30 I was aroused by what I gathered to be a new bombardment. Now, I had heard and been under fierce bom-

bardments in the past, bombardments which ran up and down the scale of ear-stunning and nerve-racking noise, in various degrees of *crescendo* and *diminuendo*; and I had heard an English bombardment certainly not inferior to any average effort of the enemy's as a symphony of death-dealing clamour: but the bombardment which now smote all my senses was like nothing I had heard before. It was a great, even awe-inspiring noise, one roll, one roar, which never diminished and never increased, and which, indeed, imagination refused to conceive could be increased. It was a noise unimaginably vast, in which there were no disintegrating items, in whose whole overpowering effect there were no fractions of noise. It came and overwhelmed me in an unpausing, irresistible, and endless wave of sound. It was caused by the firing of guns and the bursting of shells and bombs, but in this infernal tornado no discharging gun, no bursting shell or bomb made its individual voice heard above the universal clamour.

At 4.35 a.m., in this lurid and trembling world, I had the order "Gas alert"—an order which means that your gas-helmet must be carried in position for immediate use. I took mine and went out. I found that the normal, dense darkness of the hour was increased by a clinging fog, which yet was not thick enough to curtain out the flare from the flashes of great guns and the bursting of big shells. As there had been no separateness of sounds, so there was no distinctiveness in sights. The many flashes and bursts were merged in a huge, wide glare, which recalled to me the glare of

a great city seen from a distance in peace-time. The glare was not in one direction only, but swallowed the sky all round us. Shells were now passing over us, bursting in our rear. They were bursting, too, on our right, searching for a battery of artillery; and on our left they were bursting near the road, for Jerry at this early stage was attempting to hamper the movement of reserves and reinforcements.

It must be explained that the policy of the enemy on this occasion was to direct its artillery fire, not so much upon the front lines as on the rear and on particular objects. The objects selected were apparently to attack roads, to hinder and hamper the movement of troops and material, and particularly reserves, and to concentrate upon nerve-centres of organization, such as brigade headquarters.

And this they did to such purpose that in a very early phase of the fight the wires, both those overhead and underground, wires which played the part of bloodvessels from the heart of organization, had been broken. So that to a large extent, if not entirely from the early stages, communications were dependent upon despatch-riders. They in turn were hampered by the attacks upon the roads, and, left with the whole duty of communication upon their shoulders, were far too few in number for that task.

It is difficult to say whether any foresight could have guarded against an event which tended to throw us into confusion from the outset. Certain it is that even in the position where I was, and where there were more possibilities of communications being kept up

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than elsewhere, our information and communications became belated, uncertain, and irregular from the outset. But messages did come, and, after delay, in rapid succession: "Stand by!" "Stand to!" and then, "Man battle positions!"

We knew what we had to do, as darkness gave way to a wan, fog-choked light, and still that monotonous thunder of the guns kept on remorselessly. On the order "Man battle positions," certain of the men in our camp were paraded. They paraded in battle order quietly, as if about to take part in a review at home, and equally quietly they moved off under this sky afire, and over this quaking earth, to take up their appointed positions.

There linger in my memory, amid those terrible and grandiose surroundings, clear, simple recollections of the Tommies with whom I was working. It was rather an impressive sight to see them before dawn standing to attention in a row in the order of their turns, waiting for the next message, here in this wooden hut, with just a candle for light; and as each received an order he solemnly saluted the officer and disappeared into the battle-torn night.

In my recollections of this time there stands out one of our number, a boy. In civil life he had been a butcher's lad, but to-day he was a General in attributes, always ready, always calm. Whatever was wanted he met the demand with the remark, "I think I know where I can get some"; and he always did know, and always got what was wanted. When I last saw him, after he had been twenty-four hours without rest, he

was still in the hut, still standing to attention, and still waiting for the next order.

The day of the great enemy offensive wore away, and now every hour brought us tidings of what was going on in front and to the right and left of us—some of the tales wildly exaggerated. But at length the artillery died down a little, as if the past four hours' bombardment were ending. Many other bombardments of this duration had so ended, but such a tame and inconclusive finish was not to come this time. All that had happened was that some of the guns had stopped of necessity, to be cleaned, and, in order, they joined in the affray afresh, and the storm of death broke out with renewed fury.

Some of our people with stores began to fall back upon us. A few lorries got through, driven by men with bloodshot eyes, who had met and survived the onslaught.

The afternoon came, and we learned that the Germans had advanced, and were still advancing slowly upon us. The guns died down again, not this time to be cleaned but to be moved, for the Germans were still coming on, their guns behind their advancing infantry, while our guns—or some of them, for others had stayed to the last, firing in the end point-blank on the advancing enemy—were taken out of action to retire and assume fresh positions. So there came a lull of some hours, and then the guns began to speak once more.

Despatch-riders were now arriving with frequency,

giving us the positions on the battle-front; and presently there came the order to prepare to move.

We had extensive stores, and we were now engaged in making such small remaining preparations as were necessary for taking the stores with us. But the stores were heavy, and to get them on the move was no small task.

We destroyed what was less material to lighten the transport strain. Then we could only await the hour of withdrawal, and instructions about the place to which we were to withdraw. In our new leisure we wondered vaguely how near the Germans were to us.

The orders we had been expecting came. The present positions were explained, maps shown and discussed. It was now 11 p.m., and our withdrawal was to be carried out partly under cover of darkness, and we were told that one point in the road must be crossed before complete daylight, for it was in full view of the enemy, and any movement seen would draw shell-fire, since the enemy was trying to hamper any withdrawal movement.

I am bound to confess that these final orders were very irregular, from the source from which they were received; that they were almost, as it were, received by chance; and that they were belated in their arrival and uncertain in their nature; but they accurately reflected the confusion which, from the reports I had had during the day, I gathered had existed almost from the outset. Of this confusion I had confirmatory evidence in the next few hours. Of this I will speak in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVII

MARCH 22

AT 2.30 a.m. we had been standing by for nearly twenty-four hours; but we were not tired—the day had been too exciting to be tiring—and in a brief time we expected to be moving back. But my personal destiny was rapidly changed by the arrival of a despatch-rider, among whose despatches was a leave-warrant granted to me to proceed to England.

I find it hard to convey to others what this document meant to me—permission to leave this awful battle! That was the one dominant idea conveyed to my mind at the moment. I did not yet realize the difficulties I was to encounter through the warrant not being on the face of it “special,” and through my having no papers which showed the circumstances which had led to the grant of the leave. Nor at the moment had I measured how hard it must be to extricate myself from the awful hell whose waves lapped me round no matter with how many passes and papers I might be armed.

My officer at once released me, telling me that he did not know how I could get away, but that I must do the best I could for myself.

Left thus to my own resources, I went to a sergeant

with whom I had become acquainted during the past few days, and for whose capacity for dealing with a difficult situation I had come to have a great respect. After a moment's thought, he gave me this piece of concise practical advice: "You had better go to the railhead at Flavy-le-Martel. It has the disadvantage of taking you towards Jerry, but if you get off at once you may arrive there before he does. In the ordinary way a train leaves there each morning at 7.15. Whether it will run to-day I do not know. If you get there and don't get a train, follow the track west till you do get one; but I should say it is quite possible that you may be wandering about some days, and so I advise you to carry all the food you can whatever the weight means to you. I can give you some food." He gave me food for three days in a sandbag, and his parting words were: "Now, get off as quick as you can, and go as fast as you can." I hope I shall meet that sergeant of wise counsel again.

With my heavy infantry pack, and with the additional burden of three days' rations, I set out. Cutting through the wood, which had been so sure a screen for the past twenty-four hours, I came upon the main road which I had to take in order to reach the railhead.

It will be hard indeed to forget that main road as I saw it at 3 o'clock on that fateful morning. In the stream of traffic that went swirling down it in the dark, every item of war, man, beast, or machine, seemed to be represented. There were guns of all sorts and sizes, guns drawn by horses and by the "caterpillars," getting back to fresh positions to stem the tide of the

enemy's advance. There were lorries empty and lorries full, there were limbers, there was ammunition, there were infantry soldiers : and this endless flow surged on under an imperative impulsion to get to their allotted places before daybreak. Most eloquent feature of all, there were ambulances, sometimes single, sometimes in convoys ; there was never a long length in the unending chain of traffic without the emblem of the Red Cross. Sometimes the traffic gave way to let the ambulances pass, but sometimes it could not. Amidst it all, at intervals, on his stationary horse sat the military policeman, directing and regulating that long procession.

Earlier in the day I had heard that at the bridges crossing the Canal at Jussy the wildest confusion prevailed in the attempt to get our men and material back over the Canal, and it was chance rather than calculation which led to bridges being still in existence to contest about. It is not surprising that the confusion increased as March 21 and the succeeding day advanced. The positions held and the inadequacy of the defences in existence must, I suggest, be regarded as determining factors in bringing about the subsequent retreat. The report of Sir Douglas Haig, even after the censorship to which apparently it was subjected, does not, reading between the lines, place too favourable a construction on the handling of our armies in the confusion that followed the enemy's great attack of March 21.

For some time I pushed on along this road against the traffic. Sometimes a huge shell-hole made an

obstructing crescent, and sometimes the road was impassable through the broken *débris* of military transport. Shells from the enemy, too, were falling pretty freely. Faced with the difficulty of travelling on the road thus congested by friends and threatened by foes, I decided that it was easier and safer to leave it and steer across-country. It was not difficult to find the way, for though there was now a breathing-space in the battle, the flashes of the guns and the bursting of the shells made the line fairly easy to locate, and from that I knew the direction of the railway.

As I went on I became nervously conscious that nobody seemed to be going quite the same way as I was, and the cowardice begot of being alone began to get a strong upper hand, so much so that not only was I falling upon my chest directly I heard a shell whistle in the air, however far off it was going to fall, but also I began to find myself taking a similar precaution when unexpectedly one of our guns was discharged in close proximity—shots fired by a battery which was registering after taking up a new position.

Altogether my cross-country trip was getting rather trying, for it seemed to grow darker and darker, shell-holes were innumerable, and I found that falling into and panting out of them was taking more time than I spent in actual walking. Back to a road, then, I went, and luckily I had not gone far before a G.S. waggon came along, this time in my direction. Some Tommies dragged me on to it—you could always rely on a friendly lift on the road out in France.

When these good comrades put me down, I dis-

covered I had only a short distance to go to the railhead at Flavay-le-Martel.

I found on my arrival that the place was wellnigh deserted. I saw two very excited Frenchmen, and their excitement, added to my own, increased the difficulty of getting to an understanding, otherwise obstructed by a very imperfect knowledge of each other's tongue. I conveyed to them that I wanted to see the R.T.O. To this they replied, "Napoo—all napoo." I next made them understand that I wanted to get away by train. Whereupon they ran with me down the line, and half-invited and half-pushed me into a closed truck forming part of a train waiting, for greater safety, at some distance from the railhead.

I was much exhausted, but when I could collect myself I found that I was in a refugee train, and that my companions were chiefly old men and old women.

I gathered from the chatter that my appearance caused that my right to be there was under consideration by an official. I fear there was an idea in their minds that I might be a deserter from the battlefield. Fortunately for me an official interpreter was in the truck. He demanded to see my papers, and on being satisfied said he would take me on till we got to some part of the line where I was likely to be picked up by a military train. He told me that this was the last train that would leave the railhead for some time, as the Germans were advancing upon it.

Very kindly the refugees in the train, through the interpreter, offered me food and drink.

I had not been there many minutes before shells

began to fall sufficiently close to make an old woman refugee look across at me and say with a shrug : "Pas bon, monsieur." Solemnly I replied : "Pas bon, madame." And so I left the battlefield of March 21.

As I continued my journey to the coast I fell in with a Field Artillery man from the battle, and during our journey and when we had obtained a newspaper he called my attention to the English official daily report of March 21. He asked : "You were at St. Quentin on the twenty-first, weren't you?" I replied, "Yes." Whereupon he retorted : "You wouldn't think you were if you read that account." That the report gave a very misleading idea of the then state of affairs is established by the after-effects of that day.

CHAPTER XVIII

MY LAST VISIT TO THE LINES

I HAD returned to France again after a special leave. The early-morning rise and wait at Victoria, the journey to Dover and across to Calais, had all been accomplished once again. And then came the night at the rest-camp, where pals are soon made only to be lost again the next day, when that frightful train of cattle-trucks drops Tommies at various stages to join their units. At last I was dropped at Canaples in the cold dawn. A wash at a tap on the station, refreshment at a Y.M.C.A., and then we set out to find our unit, which we knew must be miles off. I soon found another pal, a G.S. waggon-driver. He was attached to my brigade, and so our journey for some distance lay together.

We set out for a long walk to find our respective destinations. Our ideas were none too clear as to either distance or direction. Our units had recently changed; we found few on the road to help us. After a long tramp we came to a large village, and in a little cottage we had a fine meal of eggs and coffee. Thus refreshed and fortified, we called on Monsieur le Maire for guidance. Monsieur le Maire could not personally help us, but he referred us to the Major in charge of a rest-camp, who proved to be a remarkably genial

individual. Meeting us in the road, he asked, "Are you going to the camp?" and when we said that we were, he replied, full of instant sympathy and helpfulness: "You look very tired and hungry. If you go into the camp the cook will get you something to eat; and then you can rest until you want to go on." We explained, however, that the resources of a cottager of France had already provided us with a good meal, and that what we wanted was to get on to our destinations. "All right," cried the accommodating Major, "come with me. I will see if I can find you a lorry that will take you to the next rest-camp, so that you won't have to do any more walking to-day. You can stay there to-night and join your unit next day."

A drive of some ten miles brought us to the camp, a cluster of about twenty tents in a pretty wooded setting. And here I had a delightful surprise. I was greeted by twenty-one of my old pals, who were returning from hospital, where the wounds which they had sustained in the March offensive had been healed. It was nice to see the old familiar faces. Our tongues flew; we exchanged news and compared experiences. Little jokes went round.

Such a meeting had to be commemorated. We commemorated it by having a great tea of milk and eggs. For our party of twenty-two we had forty-four eggs. Perhaps you would like to know how we cooked them. We divided them equally between two iron-ration bags, which we emptied for the purpose, and then we put the bags, held by strings, in a boiling copper. Our method acted efficiently. We concluded our feast by

adjourning to a local *estaminet* for just one glass each of the country's red wine.

On the morrow our small party started off to rejoin the battalion. It was very hot, and we had a long way to go to join our people in support. The quartermaster-sergeant, the senior N.C.O. and therefore in charge of us, was a good sort, and a man of resource also, and he never allowed a lorry to pass without shouting to know whether it had a load. At last Fortune favoured us, and we all scrambled into a lorry going our way. So elevated, we could see and enjoy the surrounding country, which was undulating and rather pretty, and it was country which had been spared the ravages of war. Enjoyment of the landscape is possible from a military lorry, but it is very difficult when you are trudging along a hot and dusty road burdened with a heavy pack.

We found that our battalion was in reserve, waiting to go into the lines, and its temporary headquarters were in quite a picturesque place; but its pleasantness was qualified by the fact that shells and bombs arrived occasionally from the enemy. I looked for my old friends, and found very few of them. So everything seemed strange and unfamiliar. But in Army life one soon settles down to new conditions.

We waited for a few days, and then advanced to the front lines. The going into and coming out of the lines is frequently the most exciting part of the period troops pass there, for, sometimes by accident, and sometimes because Jerry assumes or knows that a change is being made, shelling often starts during that

period. Now, shelling when you are in the open is a thing very different from shelling when in the comparative protection of the trenches, and it is, I think, the feeling of security that helps so much in the latter case. On this occasion a shell or two began to fall before we reached the trenches' shelter, but it became clear that after all Jerry was firing at a target of chances rather than at any definite object.

I found myself in trenches for some days in warm and perfect weather, though it was chilly at night, and I had not brought an overcoat. The first days were quiet and peaceful except for one little incident. At dawn I was standing on sentry, and shells began to fall very rapidly at a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile away. Light increased, and then I saw that they were all gas-shells. Jerry was throwing them into a comparatively small area, but not upon any definite object. The place he had selected was at the mouth of a valley, and his idea evidently was that the gas would drift up the valley and affect all those in it, perhaps to a great depth. So far as we were concerned we only got the tail of the gas vapour, and the German effort did not seem to be particularly effective. Nevertheless, as a precautionary measure we wore our gas-masks for a time.

After a day or two in the lines we learned that we were to move to an advanced position and occupy fresh trenches, and in this direction we moved by night. By the evening a fairly heavy bombardment was being directed upon a zone lying near to the place where we had to cross. We crossed this area without mishap,

however, and arrived at our allotted place on a clear, warm night. Our specified duty was to "dig ourselves in" before daybreak. In a sense it was a matter of digging for our lives, for in the morning the degree of our safety would depend on the depth to which we had made our trench. Summer nights are short, and we worked with pick and shovel with a right good will: and though I could even now claim little skill in this work, I found that during the past year I had learned much from necessity and from the skill of some of my companions.

By daybreak our work was completed, and none too soon, for shells, falling all round the scene of our operations, began to arrive before the light.

At dawn, on looking over the trenches we saw Albert Cathedral, or all that was left of it. I saw Albert on three occasions: once soon after the British Somme offensive—it was a ruined town then; now for a second time—a few gaunt buildings and part of the Cathedral only stood; and for a third time after the British had made their advance on August 8—then only a few straight walls remained standing out from a levelled mass of ruin.

The time came for us to go out of the trenches to support a position not always more comfortable than nearer up, for Jerry can shell farther back without risk of injury to his own men through the defects in his firing accuracy. Nevertheless, we all got very excited as the time approached for our relief, and we hoped that we should get out without being molested. It was a beautiful evening, and, in the white moonlight, we

felt very unprotected as we stepped out of the trenches. But all went well. There is always a certain attraction about taking up a position in the night. The morning brings you into an unfamiliar world ; the objects round you look quite different from what you had imagined, even if you have seen them by moonlight. But it is mainly with an eye for practical necessities that you look first around, and especially for water.

While we were in this position there was shelling, but not too much, and only a few shells fell sufficiently close to be uncomfortable. And this was my last experience in the trenches.

During this final spell in the trenches we were joined by a number of American N.C.O.'s, who came in to share our lot and to learn our trade. Both then and at all times after, when I saw more of the Americans, I found them for the most part fine men—for we were then having the pick of the race—always keen, and always so different from what they are often painted : for they were most anxious to learn rather than to teach.

CHAPTER XIX

A STAFF APPOINTMENT

I GATHERED during my military experience that the general principle of organization of the British Army in the field was that all authority flowed from G.H.Q., and it flowed to a varying number of armies. Each army had under its authority a varying number of corps staffs, which in turn regulated the doings of a varying number of divisions, while a division had under its command three brigades, each of which at one time contained four and afterwards three battalions.

For a short while I was lent by my infantry unit to a brigade headquarters, and now I come to the time when I left my unit to take up a "staff job"—with the retained rank, it is true, of private—on a corps headquarters.

It was with a feeling of great relief that I left my unit, and turned to what I conceived to be a safer and at the same time an easier, or, as we should say in the Army, a "cushy job." With a light heart I trudged to the headquarters of my—the 18th—Division under the weight of a heavy pack, containing all my possessions, along the then dusty, shell-broken roads of rural France despoiled by the activities of the enemy. A walk of some five miles brought me to my destination, a series of huts screened and sheltered in an embank-

ment created by a natural and abrupt rising in the countryside. Huts housing the signallers, huts housing the intelligence branch, huts housing the artillery departments, and huts altogether without departments, constituted headquarters.

This was a lucky day for me, for just as I neared the Divisional Headquarters, I fell in with my quartermaster-sergeant and his batman, who were quartered in the locality, and I determined to spend the night in their company if possible. I presented myself at the Divisional Headquarters, and showed my papers to a fierce little sergeant-major who had seen much service. His orders, if not conclusive as to my future, were short and direct: "Find a place here to sleep, and report at 8 o'clock to-morrow." I timidly told him that some of my regiment were in the village, and inquired whether I might go there to spend the night and get another day's rations. "All right," he said, "you can if you like, but mind you report here at 8. We don't want to look all over France for you." So I managed a capital evening with two of my old friends, and our entertainment took the form of a supper-party, for which the menu included sausages, French wine, and such vegetables as we could induce the natives, of whom there were a few left here, to sell to us, supplemented by those that with colonial freedom we took from deserted gardens.

In the morning I reported, and after a delay of some time I was taken in charge by an officer, and I set out with him in a car for my new quarters. But in the first place we did a tour of inspection, so that I saw

something of France under more favourable conditions than had been my lot before.

During the afternoon I arrived at my destination, and reported to and came under the authority of a staff-quartermaster-sergeant, a worldly man and a man of the world, and one, I found, who had learnt to the full the lesson that in this world the first step to getting what you want is to ask for it. He explained shortly to me my preliminary duties, and then showed me a place where he suggested I should sleep. It was an attic already occupied by two Tommies, but the attraction of the place, and the circumstance which made my leader point it out as suitable for sleeping in, was that there was a mattress in it which had been left by a French occupant. But after the first night I was satisfied that the provision of a mattress is not the only standard by which sleeping accommodation at the front should be judged. For instance, attics are not the fittest places in the world in which to receive falling bombs, so on the second night we three Tommies, leaving with deep regret our three mattresses, retired to a wine-cellar with our old oil-sheets to sleep on.

I say so much to show that the position at headquarters of the corps was not without its dangers and anxieties, the more so as any headquarters was a particular target for the enemy for shell-fire if within range and even for bombing raids; and it was part of their policy, and rightly so, I conceive, to endeavour to create confusion in the heart from which organization started or through which it passed.

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Of my duties I will say that I was a clerk in the Intelligence Department—a department concerned, as I gathered, to receive and distribute information of the enemy to the Divisions, brigades, and units interested. I had expected that this department would provide excitement in war in a much greater degree than it actually did. But on the other hand, I acquired a knowledge of the general running of an army and of military matters as a whole beyond my expectations.

There were excitements, it is true, voluntarily or compulsorily accepted, as appears from the following account, but were the exceptions and not the rule.

It was in the heat of the afternoon, and we approached the route over which the victorious British had passed at dawn. Presently we saw before us, and about the road along which we had to pass, festoons of black smoke which indicated the bursting of high-explosive shells. A little later the officer in whose charge I was said: "At this stage we put on our steel hats." Yet a little later, and we saw that the shells were falling rapidly to the right and left and on the road before us, and my officer said: "At this stage we will pull up under this bank till they slow down a bit."

A despatch-rider dashed past us on his motor-cycle, prepared to run the gauntlet with his despatches. Poor fellow! we saw him later lying upon a stretcher badly wounded.

While we were waiting something struck the bonnet of our car. "Hullo!" said the stolid driver by my side, "what's that?" "A piece of shrapnel from that

last black devil," I replied. "Ah!" said the imperturbable Tommy, "I thought it was something hard."

The shelling diminished. "We will go on now," said the officer. We prepared to make a dash for it. What a ride it was! Since the advance of our troops the road had apparently been continually shelled by Jerry to retard—for he could not possibly hope to stop—the advance of the artillery that was pressing on. That he had failed to stop them we saw as we went forward, for in every pitch of vantage the guns had already taken up their positions. What a fusillade they were keeping up on the retreating Germans!—a fusillade from which his gunners could not protect him! But the road on which we went showed that Jerry had exacted a toll from the gallant artillery moving to support and to protect the advancing infantry. The road was literally pitted with shell-holes, through which we picked our way as fast as the holes and other obstacles permitted—and by other obstacles I mean the revealing sights behind the shell-holes, for here you would find first one horse and then two dead, and hastily cut from the traces; and here perhaps a man, and then shells thrown from an ammunition waggon. But the advance went on, and heavier guns, driven by tractors, were ploughing their way forward.

We got through safely, but our destination was none too attractive, and before we returned, to use a Tommy's expression, "we had the wind put up us," for the shells fell round quite close enough to be unpleasant, and having got the car under a bank on the

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road, we took cover in a trench to wait for the shelling to die down.

Here we had an experience of the behaviour of two small dogs under shell-fire. A little Aberdeen terrier had come with us in the car, though really he had no business there, and just as we were taking cover a white terrier came tearing along. He seemed quite distracted. We tried to get hold of him to get him into the trench, but he was too frightened to surrender himself, and the last we saw of him was racing over open spaces towards the enemy lines. Such a sight is not uncommon in the war zone; sometimes it is a terrified, wandering dog, sometimes a scared, lost cat, that one comes across. Only the birds seem to accept the sights and sounds of war with an equal mind.

But now of the little Aberdeen terrier. We got him into the trench with us, and we should have expected him to show signs of fear as shells burst around us. But he showed none. Instead, he seemed to be quite aware that we were being attacked, and exhibited signs of the fiercest hostility to the invisible foe, so that it was with the greatest difficulty that we could keep him in the trench. At the bursting of each shell his hair bristled, and he made a frantic attempt to get out and throw himself into the combat. Even as we went away, and when we were miles from the shells, the distant sound of their bursting drew a low, angry growl from the bottom of the car.

It may be asked why and how did I get my staff appointment? Was it that I had particular and

peculiar qualifications and training that fitted me for a post in the Intelligence Department of a corps? No; for no qualification or training fits one for such a post. Was it that I had influence which enabled me to get from a position of danger and hardship to that of comparative ease and safety? No; for I never appealed even to a Second-Lieutenant. In fact and truly I determined that I was entitled, after the hardships and risks I had run for many months, to seek a better job. I and I alone determined that I was peculiarly fitted for the Intelligence Department, and I arrived at this determination without any knowledge of the work and duties which I conceived myself qualified to perform. Arriving at this determination, I went about transferring myself without reference to any officer. I did transfer myself. In the Army we call it a "wangle," and in civil life a "job." In both such transactions are common.

CHAPTER XX

LIFE AT CORPS HEADQUARTERS

THOSE engaged at headquarters and on staffs have often told me that to be in the lines is to have advantages and interests which are unknown if your lot happens to be cast behind them. But more frequently I have heard those accommodated in the front lines speak with envy and almost bitterness of men occupied with what they conceived to be a "cushy" job at headquarters.

A few rough sketches of what life at headquarters really is may enable readers to form their own comparisons.

At the outset it must be conceded that those in the forward area take a continuous risk to life and limb far in excess of the spasmodic risks at the rear, and this element alone is perhaps a determining factor in selection where selection is permitted.

I well remember on the afternoon of my arrival at the corps how an N.C.O., who had never had the fortune or misfortune to be in the front lines, told me that I must not expect that the food would be so good as that to which I had been accustomed with my infantry unit, and he really and sincerely believed that he was speaking the truth. But to illustrate into what

errors a want of knowledge of the actual conditions of the "other fellow" may lead one in estimating the light and shade of his lot, I record that I found that the food conditions at headquarters were fully fifty per cent. better than what I had been used to. I do not mean that the whole of the fifty per cent. difference was in the quantity, but I do say that there was a marked difference even in quantity. In theory every British soldier gets the same or equivalent daily ration on active service, but I ever found that in practice the nearer one got to the front lines the shorter the rations became. The difficulty of transport had some effect, and the number of hands through which food had to pass had even more effect. It must not be inferred that I am suggesting that the troops in the main had short rations. On the contrary, I formed the opinion that the supply was profligate rather than short, and had it not been for the abundance of supply the leakage *en route* would have resulted in a frequent or continuous shortage.

Of course it is obvious that food stood a better chance of getting to corps headquarters in good condition than it did to the further destination of the front lines over the intervening hazardous space. We have seen that while there was some difference in both the quantity and condition of the food, the greatest difference was in what was done with food when it reached an infantry unit on the one hand and a corps headquarters on the other, and in this wise. At corps headquarters there are a number of officers' messes—at my corps there were several. I never quite under-

stood how, why, or by what rule or regulation an officer became a member of any particular mess in preference to or default of all others. It was quite clear that rank was not the determining factor, if any factor at all. It was suggested to me that the financial standing of an officer had some influence, and it was darkly hinted that the dividing-line was not altogether unconnected with social status. No doubt the rules and regulations were well known to the officers, but I have neither information nor guidance from them. In like manner there was a sergeant-majors' mess, a sergeants' mess, and a junior clerks' mess, to which latter I belonged.

I break off to say that, although I had the entrée to each of the last-mentioned messes, this was an exception, which established the law of the Medes and Persians in the Army. I am bound to confess that if distinctions ruled in officers' messes, these distinctions were reflected with a redoubled force in the quarters of the N.C.O.'s and men; the lower the grade the more jealously was distinction maintained. Hence I found it easier to get into the sergeant-majors' mess than into that of the sergeants, while the junior clerks' mess was left to provide the greatest example of class distinction I found in the Army. I will explain.

Each department or office of the corps has an establishment strength. The allowance of men for establishment strength is in my opinion a liberal one, but this allowance is frequently exceeded by the following subterfuge. In addition to men on the establishment there is an employment or labour company, men

in low categories attached to the corps. Among these men are to be found those with special training, such as clerks and typists, who can be usefully employed in the offices of the corps. They are accordingly lent by the employment company to the corps, and do not count in the establishment. In this way the strength of the corps staff in fact and theory may be two totally different things.

Men in the establishment are deemed to be men specially skilled in the work they are called upon to do, and are usually recruited from units, either on account of their special qualifications or because they are unfit. Now, men lent from the employment company were not considered to be of the same standing as these special recruits, and were not eligible for membership of the junior clerks' mess. To such an extent was this carried, that it was only with the greatest difficulty I could get my immediate superior in my office, lent by the employment company, elected to membership of the clerks' mess to which I belonged.

Such incidents in all grades of society make one ponder over the sincerity of the cry of democracy. After all, would you find in the choicest club in London a more unbending rule of class than that applied by trade unions or the junior clerks' mess of the Third Corps headquarters?

I explain and note that a large percentage of the men at corps headquarters had not come from the fighting-lines, where and only where I found the spirit of true democracy and the boon of comradeship. It was only in the remaining percentage who had learned

true comradeship in a rough school that that spirit still lived.

I have strayed far from my point, which was to show the difference in food conditions at corps headquarters and in the line units, but I desired to explain the system of messes, for herein lay the great difference in the results of feeding. Each mess was under the management of a man whose business it was to give satisfaction to the members, both in the results which he could achieve with the ration allowance and the little "extras" which the contributions of the members permitted. The job was one worth keeping. On the other hand, the cooks for units were responsible to others than the consumers. The difference was greater than the distinction would appear to suggest. In making comparisons in regard to feeding, the conditions of a line unit as contrasted with the lesser mobility of a corps and its safer position must be constantly borne in mind; but even so there is, in my view and experience, a large margin which can be accounted for on other grounds. And these grounds are insufficient competent supervision of the N.C.O.'s and men responsible for the food when it reaches units, and the unsuitability of the food supplied. I venture to suggest in place of any reforms I might presume to put forward that if the Commissariat Department of the War Office took into its confidence a stout-hearted woman, who has needed to sink or swim in professional catering, and explained to her what it did in feeding troops and how it did it, she might tender advice which would at once save the pocket of the

War Office and add to the comfort of Tommy. I would not limit the advice sought to war conditions.

In my comparison I have now spoken from the standpoint of safety and food—to me sufficient grounds for preferring a “staff job” to the arduous duties of a Tommy in an infantry regiment; but I must add that the comparison is no less in favour of the “staff job” on account of the lightness of the work, and the conditions—especially in regard to sleep—under which it is accomplished.

Before concluding this chapter, I will give the outstanding conclusions that were forced upon me as a result of my experience with the corps, experience which I have no reason for supposing differs from that in other corps. I am of opinion—and this view is expressly based more upon my experience as a business man than my attainments as a soldier—that there were more officers, more N.C.O.’s, and more men than were necessary to accomplish the work which was, in fact, done; that some of the work done might with advantage have been left undone; and that the interests of efficiency and the positive result were not served by the surplus labour and work; and that still less were the pockets of the tax-payers benefited. It must be remembered that elaborate preparations in war are not of the same value, or so great a factor in winning the game, as they are perhaps in chess; and, again, the results of resources, which an overplus of work and labour suggest, are not of the same value in war as in peace. For instance, the marshalling of ten Divisions in ten days may affect the future of Europe

more than the marshalling of twenty Divisions in twelve days. Granted, the marshalling of twenty Divisions in twelve days three times over may reverse the result of marshalling ten Divisions in ten days once, but that is endurance and resource and not war.

Again, I am of opinion that the number of regular or time-serving officers employed at headquarters was vastly out of proportion to the number of temporary officers so engaged, and that having regard to the achievement of the temporary officers in more exacting positions, the disproportion was not justified nor the result beneficial. In support of my view I hazard the information, which may prove to be wrong on investigation (though I do not think so), that curiously enough in the departments where special knowledge was essential—*e.g.*, in artillery work, and (for languages) intelligence work—the disproportion was not so great, if it existed at all. Be this as it may, it was common gossip of the N.C.O.'s and men of the corps that temporary officers in the main did not stand the same chance of promotion and advancement as the time-serving soldiers. The disproportion between regulars and war soldiers existed also, so I gathered from evidence before me, in the ranks of N.C.O.'s and men, but not to the same extent.

I may be wrong but I am not biased, for I found working among regular officers more pleasant than under temporary officers; but these pleasant conditions in business life are not always evidence of the skill and dash of the man with whom you do business.

CHAPTER XXI

LAST DAYS

WE at corps headquarters were in close touch with the doings of other parts of the lines, and in July, 1918, we read reports from the French in the south, and with anxiety marked upon our plans the progress of the Germans which the reports to hand indicated. And then came July 18—the supreme crisis and turning-point of the Great War.

We were then stationed at Villers Bocage, the troops our corps was directing were in front of us stationary before Albert. We read the news in our encampment; we had a room in the deserted château. We accepted the news, and instinctively knew on the first day that a turn in the tide had in fact set in, and that this time it was not a repetition of indentations in the enemy's lines which were as costly to maintain as to secure.

August 8 drew near—the day on which we were to make a bid for victory. We made it and we won.

In my view it would be ungenerous and wrong to suggest that our success, at this date, was due to the weakness of the enemy rather than to our own improved skill, or that it resulted from any wearing down process evolving from our apparently otherwise unproductive efforts of the past. The simple fact is that

the net result differed widely from anything achieved by the old efforts.

So far as I was able to form an opinion as an eye-witness, and without being in the confidence of the Higher Command, I think that our efforts now and our efforts previously differed in their nature and character as widely as in their results.

I am not able to say authoritatively whether, in making our attack on August 8, we employed either as many troops or guns and other material as on previous occasions, but I am strongly of opinion that in fact we did not. Certain it is that such troops, and such material, as were brought up in addition to the troops holding the line, were placed in position in an amazingly short time. It was all done with such rapidity that it was reasonable to suppose that either the enemy would not have time to discover our intentions—and in modern warfare it is only a matter of time for any preparations to become known—or, if they did make the discovery, it would not be early enough to permit of counter-preparations.

I hazard that the skill in selecting the point of attack, coupled with speedy preparations, accounted for the success; for at no stage of the war was either the skill of the fighting officers in carrying out the orders of their superiors, or the courage of the men in following them, ever in question.

The day draws near when a battle will begin which will loom large in history. The result will determine to what length the German tide will go back—never to return. The dark grey morning dawns. The tanks

and the whippets, the stormy petrels of modern warfare, are forward unobserved, ready at the right moment to spring into battle. My leader, the quarter-master-sergeant, a lance-corporal, and I go out to see the opening of the fight. We are out in the thick, foggy morning, and we wait.

The minutes go past, and then we count the seconds. The last second comes, and then the great crash from the guns is one-sided, for the Germans have been taken completely by surprise. The noise is not such as I have heard in previous bombardments, for the reply to the thunders of our artillery is feeble, and even ours soon diminishes, for already the forward light guns are out of action. They are dashing forward at the heels and in support of our infantry. From the standpoint of the onlookers the fog is too dense to see anything but the glare of the guns; but this has been all to the good of the infantry. We win that day.

We are advancing at the heels of the infantry now, and the civilians follow close on our heels, confident behind a victorious army that they are coming back never to flee again. But it is a home-coming clouded with sorrow, for in the interval of exile the blight of the ruthless invader has fallen on everything that was most familiar and most dear.

I recall a French village, flanked by hills, in which I dwelt for a week. It had never actually been in the hands of the enemy, for his progress had been stayed four miles to the east of it, but it had come into the zone of concentrated and sustained fire.

How my memory visualizes the return to that village

when the enemy had been driven back! I see the trail of the return over the crest of the western hill, the two-wheeled farmer's van loaded with the household furniture, all that was saved in the hurried flight, with a few implements in constant use and two or three cows tied on at the back. I see others following, needing and having no vehicles, but carrying their little children and their few personal belongings.

To what do they return? As I said, the place had not been occupied by the enemy, but it was here that the British held the last frantic effort of the Germans to break through and save themselves from the impending disaster. It was here that the British and the French dug themselves in, hastily at first, irregularly and then methodically as the great retreat had ended. It was here that the retreating guns, wheeled into position, were augmented and supported by guns rushed from the rear. It was here that Foch brought up his reserves; and it was here that the Americans swarmed swiftly up, replacing experience by resolution, dash, and courage.

Long did it take before the Germans knew that they were held and beaten, knew that they had poured out the blood of their reserves and captured ground to no purpose—for their objective was still beyond them, and beyond a barrier of shot and shell, and, above all, a barrier of resolute men that would recede no farther.

Here the opposing forces poured a rain of shells, a cloud of gas, at each other, the rain becoming more remorseless, the cloud more pervasive, daily; and then came the turning-point, and the British broke through

the cordon, and the village, or all that was left of it, stood beyond the line of danger. That was the moment when the civilians returned.

Some looked for the little red-roofed houses which had been their homes—and looked in vain, for they had been burnt literally to the ground. Others, a shade more fortunate, found the mere shells of their houses, broken and torn by artillery fire—often no more than skeletons of houses, a pitiable wreckage of once bright little homes. But the French never fail to face these heartrending sights with an amazing stoical courage. Of what is left they make the best; what is destroyed they turn to build up again.

We passed first through the now accustomed sight of fair France, untouched by shot, shell, and bomb, and where only the camps of British Tommies spoke of war; and then amid the growing signs of sorrow and desolation, until at last we came to the area of enemy bombardment; and then to that tract of land, wide and long, the centre of which was “No Man’s Land” from 1914 to 1918, a tract which has no landmark except trenches, a tract where formerly well-tilled fields surrounded peaceful homes, but which now might be a tract of virgin soil, and with few charms of Nature at that. I had often seen such sights when active war was being waged over this land of desolation, when one’s thoughts were distracted from surrounding by ever-present and personal dangers; but now the active forces of war had passed from this zone and only its devastation remained. As we went through we saw our own long-held first lines, and then the enemy’s,

and there was still desolation—nay, greater desolation, for here the British artillery at last had ploughed a way for the infantry. Then came green fields again and an increasing number of houses, for the region of the long-held line was passed.

First I was quartered in the green fields that showed little sign of the past battle, for here the Germans were rolled back too swiftly either to hold the ground or to carry out any elaborate scheme of spiteful destruction. Here the great sign of war was the entire absence of any civil population. And here stands a lasting monument of the past—a large and elaborate German cemetery, showing the price, as in a ledger, paid by the enemy for the land they had held for a time.

We passed on farther, and came to a village evacuated by the enemy before the oncoming tide. The civilians, or such of them as would not be useful to the enemy, had been left by them to receive us—women and a few men, all of whom had gone through a four years' martyrdom in captivity. It is from lips such as these that you hear of the greatest sorrows which war brings in its train.

The brave infantry had gone forward and were in front. The first patrols of them swam the river to gain possession of the village. The captives heard their captors still in their midst at 5 a.m., and at 7.30 in the grey morning they saw from their windows the British Tommies advancing in twos and threes. They ran to meet them, offering with touching unselfishness their starvation rations—a little coffee, a few flowers from the gardens, just what they had got. Some of them

tried affectionately to hold the Tommies back, begging them to stay lest they should lose their lives in the pursuit. Did these people know that their captivity was coming to an end, or did this swift deliverance come as a surprise? I think they knew. After four years of hopelessness—or hoping against hope—they heard the boom of the British artillery grow closer and closer. They had speech with refugees flying back from advanced areas, who whispered the news that deliverance was at hand, and they listened and prayed for the arrival of our men.

The last phase of the war as I saw it was a wild rush in pursuit of the flying Jerry. It was forward, forward, forward, and, always retaining our organization, mile after mile we went; and as we went the débris became more, and the spoliation less, as the speed of the German retreat increased and turned to a rout. We went through villages and towns where the people were all shouting, cheering, and crying, and as the soldiers came in and took up their positions the civilians embraced them in sheer joy. Flags flew from every window—how they had been concealed from the prying Jerry it is hard to understand—and among them the Union Jack, or an imitation of it. Some of the imitations, I am bound to say, were libels, but they were well meant.

On the last night of the war, feeling that the end was at hand, I volunteered out of my time to remain on night duty for our contingent. Wire after wire I received, giving detailed information about the German forces in front of us and their doings, and

proving that the organization of information had remained steady up to the last moment. At length, in the early morning, there arrived the news I wanted, and, later, detailed instructions to act. I knew then that in a few hours the last act in this tragic drama of the nations would be ended. What would it mean? What would it not mean! It was hard to realize it, impossible to grasp the full significance of the changes it would bring to all life and the life of all. But dominating all other thoughts was a feeling of relief that a reign of horror and hatred was, after a persistence for years, to cease.

EPILOGUE

THE PRICE OF WAR

ALTHOUGH generally within my experience obtained as an infantry soldier, with all the hardship it implies, journeys in France and Belgium have been of great interest to me, especially when they have led us through country that has been at one time in the grip of the enemy or within range of his destructive guns. The sights are interesting, but the havoc wrought by modern warfare makes them profoundly sad. Often have we passed through towns and villages, once busy and thriving, not merely deserted, but practically levelled to the ground. Here in these blackened and shattered places only some three or four feet of broken brick or stonework serve to show roughly what the extent of the town or village was. But amid these melancholy ruins there are various degrees of devastation. Sometimes we come upon groups of dwellings where, either because strategy or prudence had sped the departure of the foe before his dreadful work was finished, or on account of the method of destruction which he had chosen, the four outer walls of almost every building were left standing, while the roofs and interiors had been destroyed by fire. Hundreds of these gaunt walls, through whose gaping doorways and empty windows one can see the

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grim ruin within, stand mute but eloquent witnesses of the cruel and often senseless ravages of war.

The small towns and villages of Northern France are rich in churches, many of them of great beauty as well as great size—churches which come down from the ages of faith, but can, one would imagine, even in peace-time, be but sparsely filled in our age of scepticism by the folk of this thinly populated countryside. But whether we look upon them as historical monuments or as centres of modern religious life, it is sorrowful to see the mere wreckage to which they have often been reduced, the bare foundations of once mighty walls peeping from the rubbish-strewn ground amid a scene which is one of desolation on every hand. And perhaps one feels a deeper pang still when one sees on some now shell-swept eminence, chosen by the church-builders as a fair and commanding site, the still upstanding but battered walls or even the ruined tower of what once had been a majestic building—a deeper pang because we are better able to realize the beauty of what has been destroyed.

But I will try to visualize the saddest sight of all. Imagine a point of vantage, such as you get in England, from which you can see in three directions of the compass fifteen miles of undulating ground with a mixed carpet of green pasture and arable land, a village here in a shady dell, and a village there perched on the side of a hill, a church-tower here and a church-spire there, orchards of well-matured fruit-trees stretching in every direction, and the whole scene perfected and beautified by a rich and well-distributed collection

of stately forest trees—oak, ash, and elm. Turn from this fascinating picture for a minute, and then look again upon the same ground after the tide of war has surged over it, when every house has fallen, every tower and spire disappeared, leaving only a red smudge in the picture to indicate the former standing-ground of the dwellings of men or the temples where they worshipped; and, above all, look at the ground after every tree—fruit-tree or forest tree—has been felled and then left untouched to wither on the ground: look at the two pictures I have tried to draw, and you will understand the profound sadness of one of the sights I have often seen in France.

When one sees that no attempt has been made to repair the awful destruction, or even to remove the *débris*, one wonders if those who are most nearly concerned are too broken-hearted to begin the melancholy task.

Need such havoc as this have been perpetrated even in the most terrible and destructive war (because it has been waged with the most destructive weapons) in human annals? One often hears the question asked, but it is not very easy to answer it. It is, as a matter of fact, sometimes difficult to distinguish between acts of destruction for military purposes—of which there must be many in war—and acts of purely wanton damage, because damage and destruction which are apparently wanton may have been done either to remove potential protection or screens for guns, or to impede an advancing force.

I have a particular recollection of one striking

example of damage of the character just named. On one occasion I marched for a distance of some eighteen miles along a road. On one side of it stood telegraph-poles, constructed—this was quite a novelty in my experience—not of wood, but of concrete reinforced with iron rods. Now every one of these poles had been knocked down and broken. At one time this road had been a beautiful avenue of elms, trees of great girth. For the first six miles of our journey every tree had been felled, and the object in felling them had been so that their giant trunks should delay the advance of the pursuing French. But after six miles we found, first, for about three-quarters of a mile, trees that had been chipped about a foot from the ground to insure the direction of the fall across the road, and bored ready for the charge of the explosive that was to lay them low. But beyond this chipping and boring the trees had been spared, and it was evident that at this stage the pursuit had become too hot for the enemy, and so the work of destruction had been left unfinished. Now in this case, while I could not help feeling a deep pang of sorrow at the destruction of a stately avenue of perhaps hundreds of years of growth, I had to say that in my opinion the destruction was justified by the cruel laws of war.

Probably the most instructive scene in the matter of war damage is on the battlefield of the Somme. In viewing it you come first to a land of wild and utter desolation, which indicates the position of hardly contested lines, sometimes taken and re-taken, and see once peaceful and fruitful fields which have been sub-

jected to constant shelling. Here trees have not been felled, but have been reduced in height gradually by shell-fire, and there is a profusion of great shell-holes. But as you progress you leave this type of war scenery and come to that of which I have just spoken, where there are no shell-holes, but where far-reaching damage, both that which may have been dictated by "military necessity" and that which has been done in a wanton and barbarous spirit, may be seen on every hand.

War cannot be made beautiful even by rules and regulations. Modern war can be made scientific, but it is even less beautiful than the wars of remote ages. In modern war, if armies advance rapidly they will damage the land through which they advance. If the ground is stubbornly disputed, all works of man are likely to be destroyed; but if anything is left, and the retreating force returns and strives to recapture the lost ground against a stubborn foe, then assuredly all that is left of human handiwork will perish. This is war. This is the Somme. It is idle to talk of the destruction of churches. If men who seek to save their lives think that churches will be spared, they will be found in churches. If other men think that sanctuary will be claimed in churches, they will destroy those churches. Nor is the science of shell and bomb so exact as to save churches and hospitals, even if those who wield shell or bomb wish to save them. If men who fight for God-given life think risk lies in letting prisoners and the wounded live, they will destroy both. Let men who make war know that this is war—un-

beautified and incapable of beauty. Let them not disown acts which are inseparable from war. The Germans have no doubt been guilty of wanton damage. I have seen such acts, though they have not been so numerous as is often suggested; but these acts—the destruction of fruit-trees, for example—are not more cruel than others generally recognized as “necessities” of war.

One evening, after arriving in a new encampment, I went for a stroll to take bearings of the fresh surroundings. I walked up a sloping hill, and presently I saw that I was surrounded on all sides by the war-wasted land. Little graves—sometimes a single grave, sometimes two, and sometimes more—were placed at all sorts of angles, indicating that the graves had either been dug in great haste or in silence by night. I walked from grave to grave reading the inscriptions. What a moving tale the reading made! The dates were of definite periods, but definite periods in different years, showing that each period represented a battle. I read: “To the memory of Captain — of — Regiment.” “To the memory of Lieutenant-Colonel — of — Regiment.” “To the memory of an Unknown British Soldier.” “To the memory of an Unknown German Soldier.” “To the memory of Three Unknown British Soldiers.” “To the memory of Four Unknown German Soldiers.” As I stooped over the graves the sun was setting: darkness ended my reading of the inscriptions.

You know as you look that the ground was always contested, for the vale in sight has, yes, its chain of

cemeteries. They were, to begin with, national in character. First there was a stretch of ground where only Frenchmen were buried, then came an English cemetery, and then a German. But fresh cemeteries could not continue to be made on this plan—time did not always permit; and so you come to cemeteries where one section is French, another English, and yet another German. Each section has its distinctive crosses, but the men, allies or foes, rest in one cemetery, not without a certain fitness, since they all died together and, after all, for one cause—their own country.

War necessities have not always permitted even the dead to rest. The cemeteries of 1916 could not escape the succeeding battles of 1917, and all the care and accuracy of the gunners and bombers could not avoid landmarks claimed and respected by all. Then there is not always time to make a cemetery for men who fall by the way as their force retreats, and so the roads become in places avenues of little single graves, marked by crosses and guarded, if only by barbed-wire and wiring-stakes. Again, war's necessities have sometimes made it inevitable that the burial rites of those who fell before the rapid incoming tide should pass to the enemy; and, once more, there are those for whom there has been no burial by friend or foe. . . .

Such is the price of war—a price which cannot be measured in money and against which no indemnity can be set. And so stand the simple graves, the monument and landmark of humanity, the silent token and tribute of the grief of those who in far-off lands suffer

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for a lifetime for the lack of those who will never return.

Periodically society demands that its members shall take their part, and risk their lives, in its supreme climaxes with their desperate convulsions, no matter how small the place of the individual member may be. Society indeed does not distinguish between those who have large stakes to defend and those who have none, nor between those who are willing and those who are unwilling, those who understand and those who do not. Society demands equality of sacrifice, though it does not bestow equality of rewards. But society is defeated in its demand. The only equality is that recorded by the rude, rough graves of the battle zone. And after those who have given their lives come the wounded, mangled, and maimed who crawl from the stricken field. Who stands before these claiming "equality of sacrifice"?

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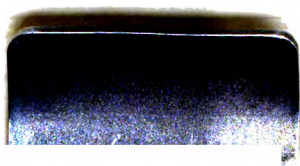
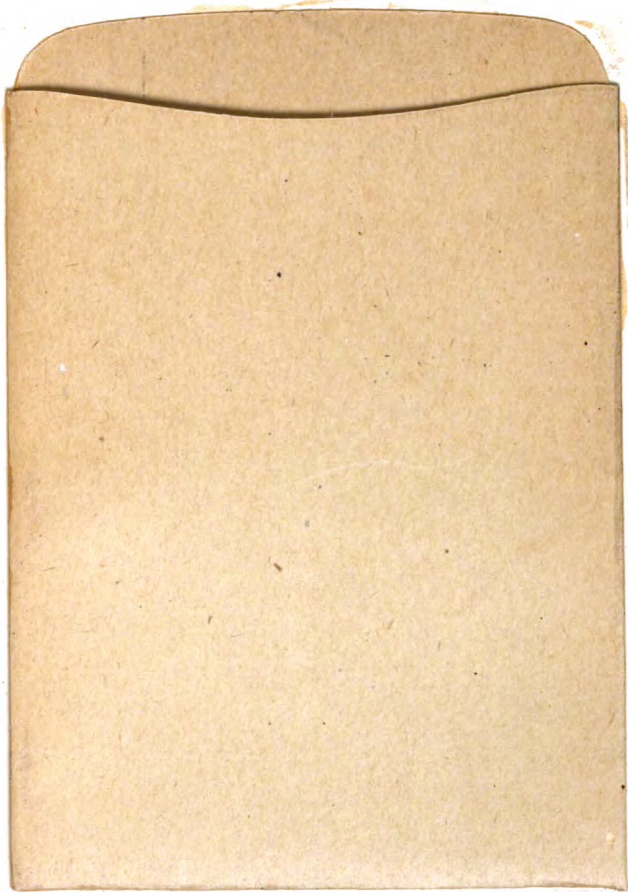
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